Galataria's Echoes

Gail Brown

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Acknowledgements

Dreaming science fiction was something that happened soon after reading my first science fiction book. For years, I wanted to write some. I once had a novel started, although, I never finished and lost the story decade ago.

A tremendous thank you to all who offer help that often you never see the results of. Years later, even decades later, those you help, will remember the assistance you gave.

May this novel assist others on their search for hope and acceptance in world often not designed for them.

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Chapter 1 - Galataria

Minus Six Months - Kalara Age 20

Kalara sang a simple tune. A smile lifted the thick glasses on her nose. Medical tests to verify the health of her future baby. Her first. Attaining parenta age had been both exciting, and scary too. It meant more time around talkies, and less alone time. Quiet replaced by vocal sounds. Little silence after the baby was born, until the last daughter left home during her first apprenticeship. At least that was what the trainers taught.

This child would be different. A boy. She had chosen the best legator. A talkie. Perhaps, her son would be a signer, like herself. As a signer, he'd be easier to train. There were times signing didn't work, while eating, walking, carrying items, or in the dark. Signers had more communication options in their fingertips than talkies with their mouths.

She held up a loose yellow shirt and soft blue pants to compare their colors. Comfort clothes. Not a starchy outfit her talkie parenta preferred. Those uncomfortable clothes were hidden in the back of the closet. Soon, to be sent on to trainees who wouldn't be concerned about baby weight.

The potential road to study genetics, or medicine, her parenta desired had been too sensory provoking. A distant memory. One that sent shudders down her spine when she saw the scratchy clothes, or books she had studied.

Organizing was her favorite skill. One passion she was comfortable with doing during regular working sessions.

She wasn't social enough. Talking to people, and wading through their lives wasn't something she was comfortable doing.

Organizing wasn't too bad. She finished the training, and now trained people from an online shop. That way, her interactions with others were more natural. Photos and short emails. Lots of pictures. Few spoken words or sounds. Her work inspired them to be better able to do their own skills. Even those whose interests were far different than her own.

A bird tweeted. She ran to the window and looked out. Birds flocked in the trees. The nests on the nesting ledge were full of

eggs, almost ready to hatch. A few deer nibbled at flowers along the fence. They enjoyed their breakfast as much as she enjoyed watching them eat. She rested her elbows on the windowsill to listen and watch.

The charged tablet had a current client's information up on the screen. She smiled. Her alarm trilled a soft tone to remind her she had to leave for her medical appointment. The client's living space required deep thought to make the changes needed. She'd work on it mentally while at the appointment. She logged off her site.

A yellow shirt, blue pants, and soft shoes that didn't pinch completed her outfit for the appointment. Nothing to carry. Everyone at the clinic knew her, and her medical history.

Before long, the zone cart runner dropped her off at the clinic.

The greeter nodded and motioned her to an inner waiting room. No need to speak or sign. The inner waiting room allowed patients to sit with buffers between chairs for quiet and privacy.

Kalara chose a seat on the side with single buffer spaces. She could relax until her name was called. She pushed the button to play a gentle birdsong melody. The sound melted out of the buffer headrest, directly against her ears. Not loud enough to be heard by others. Birdsong soothed her worry of talking away.

She closed her eyes and rested her arm on the velvety hand rest. It seemed her eyes had barely blinked closed, when she felt the gentle vibration under her hands that indicated the healer waited at the open door. Her eyes opened and she stood up gradually.

Healer Ropen stood near the door. She glanced at Kalara, then down at her charged tablet.

Kalara ambled up to the door.

The healer waved her through to the hallway. The hallway was a long maze with bits of color up high and down low. She reached for the handrail. Too much color made her dizzy. It had been painted by the talkies who built it a generation before Healer Ropen or Doctor Janel had arrived.

"Room 3."

Kalara nodded. She tottered toward the room. She knew the wall was straight. The floor level. The ceiling didn't actually wave, even though the wavy bright colors made it appear as if it did.

She stepped into the calmer room. Beige walls with bright yellow trim. A little blue and green for color here and there. She sat down on the examining table while the healer pulled up a chair.

"We are working on repainting. Do you like it?"

Kalara nodded. She raised her signing hand. "Better in here."

"How are you doing?"

"Okay." Kalara rolled up her sleeve to have her blood pressure taken. The icy cold cuff always pinched and left red marks.

Healer Ropen took her vital signs and typed them into the charged tablet. "Is there anything you need the doctor to be aware of before the sound picture?"

"It won't hurt, will it?" Kalara rubbed her arm to warm it in the cold room.

"No. It might feel warm, or cool. Certainly odd. I've never heard anyone complain of pain. You might feel sensations. A few patients feel the radio waves as they bounce through their bodies."

"Have you had one done?"

"Yes. We practice on each other in medical training. I don't remember any discomfort. Maybe it'll be my turn in the next renewal training."

"When do you go next?" Kalara stammered. If the doctor and healer she knew and trusted wouldn't be available at any point during, or soon after pregnancy, it could be a problem. She didn't know the traveling healers and doctors.

"Don't worry." Healer Ropen smiled. "We have a quarter moon session next moon cycle, and the six-quarter moon session about two sun cycles from now."

That should be plenty of time. "Okay. I'm ready for the doctor."

Healer Ropen clicked a button on her tablet. "Let's prepare you ready for the test. Behind the screen is a chair. There is a soft white gown to wear. Come back out when you are ready."

Kalara gulped. She had read the directions for the test. Sound tests showed the outline of the baby. The baby would be safer if she didn't have the test. As long as there were no complications. And with the technique used, there could be, if the implanted fetus had not attached at all, or completely. She slid off the table and walked to the tiny area behind the wooden screen.

The white gown was a soft texture. Similar to the towels in her bathroom. Acceptable for the test duration. Too scratchy to wear for

long. She pulled it on and zipped it closed. It covered her arms and legs completely. She'd stay warm through the procedure.

Soon the tests would reveal much more about her child. This wanted child. All children were wanted in a world almost destroyed by the Devolution War only four generations ago. In the last generation the environment and animals had begun to recover enough to encourage the remaining people to reconsider population growth. The techniques that had helped save the plants and animals were now being used to help save the humans who had spent more time saving the planet than saving themselves.

The healer prepared her for the exam. "Do you want the sleep shades?"

"Yes please. Til the baby is on the screen."

Healer Ropen handed her a set of blue sleep shades. She explained the procedure in more detail. The sound wave machine was used to listen to the baby, and verify it developed properly. A needle gently inserted to gather a few cells for further genetic testing. Three embryos had been tested once before being implanted. Now they would determine which one, or more had survived, as each had a different potential.

Doctor Janel entered the room. "Are you ready?"

"Ready." Her eyes closed under the blue sleep shades to hide her fear. Even if her voice trembled. It always did when talking.

"Relax."

"Will I feel the needle?"

"Perhaps. Some people do. Try not to think about it."

A soft dance tune was turned on at a low volume for her to focus on.

The healer spoke each step clearly before she did it.

The zipper on the gown was unzipped along her belly. A cool breeze wafted across it. Then warmth. The soft instrument rubbed across her abdomen, paused, and clicked in places. A tiny pinch. An ache like none she had ever felt. Not even when her eggs had been harvested to create the embryos.

"Almost done." Healer Ropen squeezed her hand. "You will have a baby boy."

A boy. Those were rare.

Dr. Janel closed and zipped up the gown. "You may take the sleep shades off. Sit up slowly, and I'll show you the pictures."

Kalara struggled to sit up.

There on the screen was the baby. A living being inside her that would grow to be a man.

The outline didn't look much like an infant at this point. In another moon cycle the outline would develop a more human appearance. Too much risk of genetic drift to run the sound test again, unless there was a medical need discovered in this test.

"What do you think?" Healer Ropen worked the blood test machine.

"Looks like the information pictures. He looks good?"

"Perfect at this stage. Report will be ready soon."

Dr. Janel walked over to the screen. "Looks good. He will be healthy."

"I'm glad."

"How prepared are you?"

"I'll have to buy a full skill finder, for all the trades. Rather than a simple one. Maybe two." She traced the picture on the screen. A skill finder for his crib and his play area.

"You'll be able to hold him in about six moon cycles." Dr. Janel made a few notes on her charged tablet. "Have you chosen of any names?"

"No." Kalara's generation would raise the first generation that had not known the violence of war. The specter of war would remain in their genes for another three generations, another sixty sun cycles of ancient birthscars. Once the last of the generation, born sixty or more sun cycles from now died, the Devolution War scars should be gone from living memory. She knew, and society knew, it was time to increase the numbers of humans, before they were too few to do so.

Men would go from being rare, to being one-tenth of the population. Currently, they were so rare, that she had only seen a few in her lifetime. There were many pictures in archival records. Even a pictorial memory of a time when men outnumbered women two to one.

She stepped out of the changing area dressed and ready to return home.

Healer Ropen waited to walk her out. "The zone cart will be here soon."

"Thank you." Kalara walked out the front door of the clinic to the benches. Sun filtered through the leaves of the elm tree nearby. A tree species that had once almost died. There were a dozen more types of trees known to exist than the number of humans at the end of the Devolution War four generations before. Those trees now far outnumbered the people. By millions.

She patted her knee. It was time to bring the humans back. To not repeat what was in the archives.

Chapter 2 - Earth

Minus Six Months and counting - Shalin Age 35

Shalin scanned the empty room. Plain grayish plastic chairs. Half of them broken. One leaned drunkenly on its side. It was a scene she had seen far too frequently. From both sides of the counter. It wasn't pleasant from either side.

She sighed as she signed the clipboard at the front desk. The metal clip was broken in half, with ragged metal across the edge. Dark stained paper had been ripped across the clip, and a corner torn off the bottom. The pen tied to it had barely enough ink to write her name in a spidery fashion.

The receptionist didn't even speak to her, or wave. She was too busy talking on the phone. From the receptionist side of the conversation, it appeared as if the potential patient had a severe bladder infection and there was no one available to treat her, and wouldn't be, for six months. A probable death sentence for the unknown, and uninsured, woman.

At least Shalin could make an appointment since she was pregnant. Too many women couldn't. That had been her a few months ago. Unable to obtain an appointment for a life-threatening illness. In her case, an infected tooth almost caused a heart attack.

This genetic test program pregnancy wasn't exactly wanted. It's not that it was unwanted. The program would lead to at least nine months of medical care. More than she had had in many years. Since she herself had been a teen. The day before her eighteenth birthday had been her last covered medical exam. Before her foster care insurance was cut off by the state. And before her foster parents were expected to turn her out to take another homeless foster child into their home.

Luckily, they had given her time. Helped her prepare for college, even if they couldn't afford to help her financially. They had been there. Offering guidance, emotional support, and connections. Until another foster child's biological family had made sure they wouldn't be there for anyone else.

The room began to fill up around her. Women with small children trundled in. Little boys raced around the broken chairs.

Young girls sat primly at their mother's feet. As if the dirt and food encrusted floor were soft cushions. The women had a vacant look, as if they couldn't see even six inches in front of their faces. They didn't see what was around them, as if they didn't know. Perhaps they didn't. She had been there not that long ago. Working too much, without enough sleep, or even nutrition, to pay attention to the world around her.

Shalin had an opportunity. An opportunity she might never have again. A genetic medical study to pay all her expenses, housing, food, medical care. All she had to do was carry a child created in the lab to full-term. They had used her eggs, and a donor's sperm, to create the baby in a test tube. One of the first created at Emerging Lineages, the Baltimore genetic clinic location. She had even met the father. Shalin didn't understand him, and couldn't communicate with him. He was some kind of scientist. She had forgotten all science terminology when she graduated from college a decade ago.

Once the child was born, follow-up medical care was provided for the mother and the baby for at least a few years. She wasn't certain sure how all that worked. The paperwork hadn't been entirely clear. At least it would be her baby. Probably her only chance to have one.

The receptionist called her name.

She stepped back up to the counter.

"Patient paperwork, insurance cards, 2 photo ids, and current address."

Shalin handed her the required paperwork.

"You have a $50 co-pay, and additional amounts for any treatment. Sign here."

Shalin glanced at the paperwork she signed. The appointment should be covered. Or perhaps, she had to pay up front, and expect Emerging Lineages to refund the cost to her directly.

It had seemed odd that the patients in the study were expected to rely on their normal health care options. That was part of this genetic study. She walked back to her seat. Genetics had not been an area she excelled in. Science had interested her. It was more the outcomes that interested her.

A nurse stepped through the door. "Shayla."

No other woman stood up. Being misnamed happened almost daily. Shalin stood up and walked over to the nurse.

"I'm Shalin."

The nurse made a rude noise in her throat. "Birthdate?"

Shalin rattled off her birthday. Age had made that routine annoying. Thirty-five years old, and already cynical.

"This way." The nurse snapped through the door and race-walked down the hall.

Shalin tottered behind. Three months pregnant now, this shouldn't be so difficult. She had once been the fittest person on her high school track team. Since college, she had walked and hiked, when she wasn't working. The almost untreated tooth infection had left her with some devastating permanent health issues.

The nurse tapped her foot in front of the scales.

Shalin stepped up on them.

"At 150 pounds, you need to lose some weight. You'd walk better. Step over to this chair."

A couple of people trudged by behind her. Patients and a nurse most likely. One woman's face was bright red. As red as her shirt. She turned away.

Shalin sat in the chair in the middle of the hallway. A tear trickled out of her eye. Her weight had always been low. Too low. Before the untreated tooth infection.

The nurse took her blood pressure in the hallway. "Not bad for your weight. You need a diet and exercise program. Are you here to see the nutritionist?"

Shalin shook her head. "Pregnancy checkup."

"You're too fat to be pregnant." The nurse stood up. "Go sit in that line of chairs down the hall. The doctor will call your name when he is ready to see you."

Shalin struggled to her feet. She was ten pounds overweight. Not too bad. Especially if she wanted to have a healthy baby. The line of chairs was filled with more women and children waiting their turn. She sat next to a woman with a little boy.

The little boy reclined on the woman's lap against her chest. His nose dribbled onto the tiny fist in his mouth. He made a few sounds. Normal baby pre-speech.

Shalin smiled at the baby.

He waved his spit and snot covered fist at her. His little coos filled her heart with joy.

Before long a tired older man appeared in front of her. His shoulders slumped. He looked down at her. "Shalin? I'm Dr. Grendal. Follow me."

She stood up and followed him.

Even as he shuffled down the hall, he didn't lift his head to see straight ahead. As if he spent all his life stooped over, filling in charts, and peering at people sitting under his watchful eye.

In the darkened tiny room, she climbed three cracked plastic steps up to the exam table.

The doctor skimmed the paper chart he carried. "You can walk. I assume you can talk. Why do you think you are here?"

"Pre-natal checkup."

"You look fine. Nothing visibly wrong."

Shalin blinked. The doctor had seen her face and her hands. Nothing else. "I'm supposed to have an ultrasound every month until the baby is born."

"You don't need one. You don't appear to be in distress. It's merely an unborn baby."

Her chin dropped. "The genetics doctor said."

"Yeah. We have millions of unwanted babies in this country. I don't have time to schedule an ultrasound for a baby the country doesn't need. Find another doctor if you want one. Or go back to the doctor that set up this pregnancy."

"Would you do it if the father were here?"

The doctor shook his head. "Even with a known father, there aren't enough resources. If he could explain any symptoms that warranted it, we might consider it." He held out his arm and pointed toward the open door.

Shalin had never felt so dismissed before at this low-income clinic.

She pulled herself down from the table and trudged out the door. As she glanced back, the doctor had her chart on the exam table and wrote something in it. "What are you writing?"

"That you don't need any medical treatment."

"May I see it?" Medical charts contain errors. Many errors. Even pages from other patients frequently mixed in. She had corrected many a medical file clerk to pay for her college education.

"Absolutely not. You are a patient. You wouldn't understand medical terms. I don't have time to educate you."

A tear slipped out of her eye. A cloud of tears blurred her vision as she walked to the checkout desk. It was illegal for her to not be able to see her chart. Many doctors fought the law on that. In a way, it was understandable. Medical jargon didn't have clear and easy to comprehend definitions. Sometimes, they made other notes about the patients that were less than flattering. Often dangerous, that led to medial neglect.

"That'll be $50.00." The receptionist held out her hand.

"He didn't even exam me."

"Doesn't matter. You took up an appointment time and space."

Shalin pulled out her purse. "I can write a check."

"We don't take checks. Cash or credit only. We prefer cash."

Shalin's eyes opened wide. Cash preferred? No one preferred cash anymore. She pulled out her credit card.

"We charge $3 extra for credit transactions." The woman typed more notes into her computer.

Shalin handed the card over. So many did these days.

After the transaction was complete, she left the building for the long walk home. That $53 had been meant for food for the next month. At least there was a food bank near her home, if they weren't empty. They only had one pack of dry noodles last week.

Perhaps a call to Emerging Lineages could net her some cash to cover food until the payment processed. She shook the tears out of her eyes. The genetic clinic administrators couldn't know how serious her money situation was. They wouldn't understand. Their clinic demonstrated the peak of prosperity. Most of the patients who went there had never gone without a meal. And it had shown. However, for this study, they had requested a cross section of society. A foster sister she barely knew had recommended her for the study.

The sidewalks were broken. Crumbled away to dead grass and mud in some places. She dodged a pothole in the sidewalk full of a greasy slimy mess. A car honked at her, and the driver yelled obscenities at her for daring to step into the road. No car had been there a moment before.

More tears tickled from her eyes. One slipped down her cheek as she climbed the crumbled steps to the apartment house she

shared with five other people. She slipped the outdoor key into the lock and turned. It stuck. It took two hands to turn the key. How could she hold a baby, or a toddler's hand, and manage this lock? If there were rain and snow out here?

She walked down the hall to her door. The inside locks were not as weather damaged. When the home had been separated into apartments, the original kitchen had been allocated to her apartment. Which meant most of her apartment was a kitchen. Her bed was in the once spacious dining room. The wood paneling had been worn down in over a century of use. It still gleamed when the sun reflected off it.

If only she hadn't lost her job at the bank. The pay had been decent. Even though they didn't have dental insurance policies for the employees. The infected tooth wasn't covered. Nor had been the resulting hospital stay, because teeth weren't considered important. It was a pre-existing condition. She had lost her job, and what little health care the expensive insurance covered.

Shalin sat down on her bed and allowed the tears to slip out unheeded. She woke up an hour later feeling hot. Her eyes were swollen and crusted shut.

The clock said 4 pm. She'd have to hurry if she wanted to reach the food bank in time for something to eat over the next few days. And continue looking for a job. If any employer would hire her due to her pre-existing conditions.

Chapter 3 - Galataria

Minus Two Weeks - Kalara Age 20

Kalara adjusted the strings on the skill finder. It hung over a rare wooden cradle. Warm sunshine poured through the window, almost as musical as the birdsong. A nearby tree provided shade from the harsher late light.

Her parenta knocked on the door. "Are you ready?"

"I think so. I'll miss being home." She smoothed the soft blanket one more time.

"I know. A half moon cycle, or two, with no worries is best at this time. Gives you time to rest, prepare, and bond with the baby."

"Did you bond with your baby boy?" Kalara closed the curtains.

Her parenta sat down. "No. Most women have chosen not too. It's easier to give them up. Now though, you have the chance."

"I hope I am successful."

"You will be. I think this is your strength. To be a parenta. Historically, women who wanted to be parentas might have many children." She moved her hand across her lap.

"Did you want more daughters?" Kalara touched the cradle and the notches that showed how many babies had slept there.

"Yes. My primary skill was in too much need to allow me the time off I needed. My eggs went to other women who couldn't have their own children." She closed her eyes. "Genetic research remained too vital. I don't know how many siblings you may have. I chose not to follow them."

"That should have been my work." Kalara lowered her head. Genetics had been ignored on her skill finder. That she knew. Her own skill finder hung over the cradle in front of her. The genetics skill shape had almost no wear. She reached up and touched it. It bounced against the teaching skill shape.

"You wore the design shape out. I replaced it for your child."

"Do you wish you had raised one of my siblings? They might have completed your work." The tinkling of the skill finder slowed to a stop.

"No. You are a perfect daughter for me. You reminded me to slow down, and enjoy life. The child of my heart."

"If not your health."

Her parenta smiled. "Yes. I waited for you. I worked too long and too much."

"Was design really my skill choice?"

"Design was the one you grabbed most often. Trainer was high on your skill finder grabs. That's why I think you will be a good parenta. Better than me." Her parenta leaned back and pulled Kalara's baby blanket close.

"Does everyone follow their skill finder?" Kalara touched the blanket. She had used it for two sun cycles as an infant. As had her parenta before her. Now, it would comfort her newborn child. Continuity meant something. Hope. Dreams of the future when women safely encouraged men back into daily society.

Geneticists hoped five generations had been enough. Some ancient cultures claimed seven generations were needed to remove the Devolution War stain from memory. Did the seven mean all seven generations had to be born and die? Or the seventh born? It was common to have four to five generations alive at one time since many people lived eighty to one hundred sun cycles.

"No. I didn't. I was supposed to be a musician. Sometimes, the skill people will follow isn't on the skill finder."

"Genetics was on the skill finder." Kalara laughed. She sat down beside her parenta on an heirloom hope chest.

Her parenta nodded. "I can't sing or play a single instrument. I can design and build them."

"Your woodwinds always make perfect music."

"Did you know I was one of the first in three generations to be allowed to cut a tree limb to make an instrument?"

"I thought you had to use dropped limbs." There had been changes even in her own parenta's generation. Kalara smiled. Her generation had their own changes.

"My trainer brought an elderly man from a men's village for me to learn more about the various tree species during my renewal training for a second skill. I thought I knew so much from my genetic studies on increasing tree growth and reforesting projects." Her parenta leaned forward to drink some water.

"I didn't know you met one."

"I met several from Genetica while in Maryiana. The musician trainer taught me how to recognize the best trees for instruments,

and the perfect limbs. After finding them, he taught me to drill and carve them. He didn't want to spend much time in Maryiana, so I learned more on my own from books and charged tablets." Her parenta glanced out the window at a bird that fluttered down from the nesting ledge.

"Must have been difficult for him to leave the only place he remembered."

"He was from an ancient tribe. He didn't want to leave his home for any longer than necessary. In that community, the men's village and the nearby women's villages interact more than in most of Galataria. The Matrilineal Council allowed them to manage their own way of life, as long as they had no problems, and no one broke any laws."

"Didn't living that way break laws?" Kalara moved to feel the cooler breeze coming in from the ground vents.

Her parenta nodded. "It bent a few. They allowed them freedoms sooner than in other areas. They were given a chance to adjust the eighty sun cycle ban on open contact to sixty sun cycles as long as all other laws were followed, and women were safe."

"Some boys grew up with their parenta?"

"Few. The parenta kept their boys until they began walking, then they were raised in the men's village. Almost as open as Genetica is now. And has been for several sun cycles."

Kalara leaned back as the baby wiggled. Men in the women's villages were rare. They were generally escorted through to whichever community they needed to move to in order to practice their skills. Vital skills that helped keep communities alive.

She'd be one of the first women to do as this ancient culture had done. It hadn't quite processed through her mind that in the future her infant boy would be a man walking in the same village as her. Whispers of the past, of wars, of memories long forgotten by the living surged.

If the fear was too strong, she could send her baby boy to be raised by men. Leonard was her son. A relationship no one in her village had known in living memory. Even the oldest women in the villages had no memory of raising a son. They had given birth, and given their sons to be raised by men.

The weight of her opportunity, and the pressure to raise her son to safely live among women was great. Almost too much. Perhaps,

talkies should have been given the first opportunity to raise sons. None had been approved, and the council planned at least ten sun cycles before talkies were allowed to apply to raise a son.

"I guess it is time to go." Kalara struggled to stand without help from her parenta. Her parenta held out her arm to help her stand up. However, her parenta was a talkie. They hadn't been as close as most parentas and daughters. The gulf between them had widened in the last sun cycle. That memory of her parenta working with a man widened it even more.

Soon, they were no longer in her nice wooded community. The decorative gate in front of them led to the local birthing center. Trees were not close to the building. It was a nice bright place. It felt open. Almost too open. The clinic where she had her quarter moon checkups was across the grounds, close to the homes where the healers and doctors lived. They were on call at any moment, and would be there regardless of the weather.

As an almost parenta, she had a special two room apartment, with one adjoining apartment for her parenta, sister, or friend, to stay nearby. No cooking, laundry, or heavy work was allowed during this time. Healer Ropen visited them each light cycle. Everything was provided by other women whose sole job was tending the parentas-to-be.

"How many people are here?" Kalara rubbed her hands together. In order for her to be calm for Leonard's birth, she needed only those she knew and trusted around her. Her mind attempted to focus on the here and now. His birth. And not become lost in the tangled web of thoughts and fears her parenta had opened the door to with talk. Words that did not calm Kalara.

"There is room for four families. No more." Her parenta parked the aged solar cart. "It'll be okay."

Kalara nodded. Her hands shook when she thought about being around people she didn't know for a half moon or more. Her mind whirled with fear. People she didn't know might expect her to talk. To respond to their words. Words that often hid their meanings. Hopefully, they would stay in their own rooms, or explore the grounds without trying to talk to her.

The glass doors led into a spacious room with comfortable chairs. Tables were covered by table top games and puzzles. Stuffed animals lined up on a shelf. A few small child-sized chairs stacked in one corner next to couches with side tables.

At one table a woman sat alone piecing a puzzle. She looked up as Kalara and her parenta walked in. "How are you?"

Kalara glanced at the empty greeter desk. "I'm Kalara." She hugged her clothes bag.

"Your rooms are ready. I'll show you to them. Do you want to look around the lobby?" The woman stood up and hurried to the greeter desk.

"No. I'll visit it later." Kalara's heart fluttered.

"Certainly." The greeter reached for a charged tablet. "I am Chelly. I'll show you around."

"I didn't meet you on the tour last moon cycle." Kalara followed the woman as she led them down the hall.

"I was on vacation. I had gone to visit my parenta." She led them to the last door on the right. "This will be where you will stay while you are here. Let me know if you need anything else."

Chelly opened the door and handed a small card to Kalara. "Your parenta's room will be across the hall."

Kalara tiptoed into the room. It was bright, too bright. She walked over to the curtains. Three sets of them. The outer layer, little more than lace, the inner layer a heavy drape, and the middle blue set, somewhere in between. She chose the middle layer and closed it. Better. The curtains gave the room had a dappled look. Enough light to see enough to move around, not enough to hurt her eyes or head, and not so little that she needed a light on.

This main room was a sitting room with a couch and two chairs. A small bookshelf with a few books nestled into one corner. A small table with two chairs sat in another corner.

She walked into the next room. A bedroom with a wider than normal bed, dresser, table, and lamp. This room even had an overhead light, which was rare in homes. A visible sign that this wasn't a home.

Kalara placed her clothes bag on the table. She'd unpack later.

The wall beside the bed had a difference in the paneling. She touched a particular dark knot of wood. The panel opened. There were all the tools needed to assist in Leonard's birth. Clean towels,

sterilized equipment, pillows, and a yellow birthing blanket. Her heart beat a little too strongly. She breathed deeply and pushed the panel back into the wall.

A knock sounded at the door. "Kalara, you ready?"

"Yes."

Her parenta walked into the bedroom. "Not much different from where you were born. Have you checked the bathroom?"

"I saw it on the tour. The bath is specially designed to allow me to step in and out easy. If I decide to have a water birth, there is plenty of room for the doctor, healer, and you." Her stomach jumped. Complicated. Too many emotions. A swirl of color as thoughts drifted through and didn't quite connect in her conscious mind.

"Good. I'll be here if you need me. I brought books." She turned back to the living area.

Kalara nodded. Quiet. No work allowed. She had brought paper and art supplies. She reached into her bag and pulled them out. A perfect soft grey pastel. In the living room she sat at the table and began a new picture. One of hope. A drawing of a woman lifting a baby boy out of a crib. The blanket slid slightly off, showing the toes of the right foot. Her eyes drifted closed as her fingers drew what they perceived deep in her brain.

Chapter 4 - Earth

Minus Two Weeks - Shalin Age 35

The alarm clock beeped. Shalin struggled awake and tapped it off. She wiped sweat her face and struggled to sit up. A few more weeks of pregnancy. Sweat beaded down her face.

The floor overhead thumped. Someone in the upstairs apartment had woke up. Or fell flat on the floor. Again. The couple up there tended to fight. Sometimes loudly.

She pulled herself awake and splashed her face with water. Her retail job would last as long as she was able to walk with this pregnancy. As soon as she missed her first day of work, they'd fire her. Even though it wasn't legal, it was easy for employers to use the "missed shift" clause to fire employees. Especially ones with pre-existing conditions.

She'd have no income, and be unable to job hunt until the doctors released her to work again. Probably two weeks with no income. Shalin had saved almost enough to pay for childcare for a week. Expensive with no income while job hunting. Why had this pregnancy seemed like a good idea?

Oh yeah. Healthcare. Whether she had an income or not. It wasn't good healthcare. The state indigent healthcare covered some of the basics. Minimally.

Shalin drank a cup of milk before she left for work at the department store. Her lips curled at the acidic spoiled taste, even though it was cold, and not expired. Her stomach growled. Going without solid food wasn't good for her, or the baby. Other than a water bottle chilling for her work day, it was the only item in the fridge. Hopefully, she'd have time after work to stop by the food bank on her way home.

She grabbed the water bottle and hurried to the table by the door to pick up her keys for work. The door stuck as she pulled it open. A forceful pull made it close with a sharp bang.

A woman stood a few doors down, in front of the door that had once belonged to a massive library. The neighbor glanced at Shalin, and smiled as she put the key in the lock. "Work today?"

"Yes."

"Be careful. It's slippery out there."

"I will."

"Another step has a hole through it. You can see the darkness." The neighbor slipped into her apartment and closed the door.

The six steps up to the front door were crumbling, and they weren't solid underneath. Bare ground was exposed through them. Several feet down. Not completely bare, as they had crumbled bits of concrete in them. And whatever fell out of tenant's hands as they trundled up the stairs, or tumbled down them. Another hole, another chance to trip and fall. Especially as she couldn't even see her feet.

Shalin glanced around. Anyone watching who didn't know the condition of the steps would assume she was drunk as she descended them. She clutched the stair rail. It wobbled. Left, right, and center. Then right again, to avoid the worst of the holes in the steps.

It was a fifteen-minute walk to the Dollar Mat in good weather, and with little traffic. Today, there was ice and snow, and lots of winter traffic. The sidewalks were rarely cleared. She'd have to dodge the snow plow piles in the road.

She stepped in the slush at the bottom of the steps. It poured through the holes in her second hand shoes. Or maybe third hand for all she knew.

When cleared of snow, the battered sidewalk was almost wide enough for two toddlers to walk side by side. Passing someone often meant one of them stepping into the street. Especially in front of some of the houses that had untrimmed bushes growing across the sidewalk as it hugged the road.

A neighbor she recognized was out trying to clear a path to her car parked on the street. It was difficult for her to do from her wheelchair. Last year, Shalin had been able to help her. Today she couldn't. She waved hi, and the woman waved back.

Another block, and three large snow plow piles dodged, she arrived at the road to cross to reach the Dollar Mat. The walk light had turned red. She'd have to wait, up to ten minutes for traffic to clear. A four-foot-tall, and five-foot-wide drift of icy sludge blocked the curb cut to the slushy street. She waded to the right of it, even though that meant crossing outside the crosswalk, as there was no safe way to step from the sidewalk to the crosswalk. She'd angle

back to the crosswalk once she could safely step down into the street.

Shalin leaned from side to side. Several people walked up behind her. She shivered. Her coat had more holes than material on the inside. The outside appeared nice, even if it was too thin for the current temperatures.

The light changed, and the group of people began to cross the street while the crosswalk sign was green. A car zoomed past them honking as it raced to turn right, almost bowling them all over. A passenger rolled down the window and screamed, "Get a job and get a car!" It roared off into the distance.

The people around her looked at each other, made sure no one had fallen, and continued their trek across the busy road. No one else tried to run them down.

The local Dollar Mat wasn't much. A general store that purported to sell everything for the lowest price possible, with an attached laundry mat. A great solution at times. Shoppers kept an eye on the running washers and dryers on the other side of a wall of windows. It brought more money to both sides of a business run by out of town siblings who owned more businesses than they could attend to.

Shalin unlocked the door. She quickly locked it behind her and reset the alarm. She grabbed an umbrella from the stand to help her feel her way through the dark store to the back. The lights remained off for another half hour while she sorted sales items in the dimly lit back room.

A quiet thirty minutes. Time to think. To focus. To plan. To dream. To view a world she had only glimpsed. A world where she had a quiet room with a computer and a bed. A wide window, with trees outside. No people around. Wild animals outside. Some she had never seen before.

Her hands worked at unpacking boxes onto sales carts as hurried to prepare the store for a delivery truck due to arrive. Perhaps the last she'd unload while she worked here.

Two other employees arrived to help her unload the truck. The holiday season took a greater toll on the store, and the employees, than most customers realized.

The truck chugged to a stop behind the bay door that served both businesses contained in the Dollar Mat. It bumped the roof

housing, as it often did. One more dent for the door. The truck barely fit into the small space allowed for it to park. In fact, a different driver a few weeks ago had left their truck front end hanging out in traffic. The engine had been carried away by another trucker, who had then broken down, and blocked the truck, as they finished unloading. Which left icy air wafting inside, along with snow, as the bay door couldn't be closed for hours.

Shalin pulled the rope to lift the door.

The driver appeared in a few minutes. He rubbed his hands to warm them. He glanced at her. "Still here?"

She nodded. Words took more effort than she could manage as she watched the door reach the top and settle into position, dislodging dust all over them.

He opened the back door and lowered the ramp.

The truck blocked part of the door, so she had to keep watch to make sure no customers snuck in or out through the opening while she helped unload.

The driver stacked boxes on the ramp and slid them down. "Let me put some of the larger ones on the carts for you."

He paused to let the boxes slide down the ramp. "You should be home resting, not lifting heavy boxes."

Shalin leaned against the ramp and looked at the doors. "I have to. No income for a month, or more. Most likely. I have to pay the rent."

He helped stack the boxes. "Can you rent out part of your home?"

Shalin laughed. A two-room apartment? And now a baby? There was nowhere for someone else to sleep. "I've only two rooms. No room for anyone else."

He rolled another box up to her. "Here's a business card. My sister is looking for a place to stay. I am sure she'd be happy to help with the baby."

Shalin took the card he handed her. Pretty green leaves with the name Irma in twirled letters. Below it gave a phone number and said she was an artist. "I'll call. What kind of art does she do?"

He laughed. "She likes to draw. There aren't many paying opportunities for that. She works at a fancy hotel in downtown. Does a little artwork on the side."

Shalin pulled on some of the lighter boxes. Boxes of candy and toys. Toys she could never afford to give her child on minimum wage. Even if they only cost a few dollars. Living alone was too expensive.

Perhaps the driver, whose name she hadn't asked, was right. Someone to help share the bills would benefit both adults and the baby.

The driver finished helping unload the truck. He waved to her before he left.

She closed down the bay door. Noise and commotion overwhelmed her. The smells inside the stock room assaulted her nose. Truck fumes had entered in the back door, along with the cold air and some grey snow. She mopped up the grey slush and tried to dry the floor by the back door after the truck pulled away.

A few seconds of quiet. The cold tingled her fingers less. She opened the office and went inside for some hot coffee before going back to work filling more stock carts.

One employee walked to the back to return an empty stock cart. "You okay?"

Shalin nodded and held up the steaming coffee.

The employee smiled. "This cart will take about ten minutes."

"I'll be done before then." She drank a few more sips and rested her weary feet. Hot coffee. A perk of the job. Something other than plain cold water. She sighed as she sat down the empty cup to return to loading carts. The quiet and peace couldn't last. Especially with the rumbles coming from the washers, driers, and the roadway right behind the store.

The other clerks did most of the work inside the main store while she staged stock carts from the truck delivery. It wasn't easy work. Some of the boxes were heavy. As much as fifty pounds. She hefted an unwieldy and heavy box onto the long blue cart.

The day plodded along with more customers than usual. The pains in her abdomen were normal for late pregnancy, or so she had been told by Dr. Grendal.

Something solid and heavy hit her from behind. Her pregnant belly bumped into a stack of holiday lights on the cart. Sharp cardboard left an indention in her sweater.

A male voice behind her, obviously a customer, shouted some words at her.

She turned to listen closer. "What did you say?"

After a string of curse words, he grabbed his shopping cart to push toward her again. "Get out here and do your job. There is a line waiting at the cash registers."

Shalin protected her belly from the cart's onslaught. "Both cashiers are at the two registers. This is my job."

"Then walk or hobble out there and help!" He slammed the cart at her and stalked off.

The shopping cart knocked her into the pile of boxes on the stock cart. The thirty pound one she had placed on top slid off and bumped her belly on the way down.

Shalin grabbed her stomach and screamed. The alarm shut both sides of the Dollar Mat down. She curled up on the floor in pain.

Customers yelled as the doors automatically slammed shut and locked. No one could leave before the police arrived.

Shalin closed her eyes. Waves of pain washed over her. She had to pull herself up. She had to work two more weeks. And find food before the baby arrived. A hand grabbed the stock cart. It slid to the backdoor. She closed her eyes. The hands of her fellow co-workers touched her shoulders.

She slipped out of consciousness.

Chapter 5 - Galataria

Birth of Leonard - Kalara Age 20

Kalara breathed deeply. The drawing had not turned out right. Something was wrong. There was a man behind the woman holding the baby. Strange. Men didn't work in birthing centers. The walls were dingy. No chairs, dressers, or homey furniture. She glanced at her parenta.

Her parenta was asleep on the couch. The book had slipped down to the cushion beside her.

She turned the page. Maybe another drawing. A picture of a building grew as she colored. The building was only an outline. Multiple shelves led up to a door. Broken shelves. With chunks of odds and ends scattered around. That was odd. Buildings didn't have shelves in front of their doors anymore. Buildings and homes had to be accessible to all people, not only a small portion of the population. Shelved homes and buildings only occurred in pictures of abandoned towns from before the Devolution War.

A bell rang. Healer Ropen opened the door and carried in a tray with food on it. "Here is a small snack. Would you like anything else?"

Kalara glanced at the tray. A small meat and vegetable pie. A healthy snack for her and baby Leonard. He kicked a little and shifted deep inside. "That'll be fine. I may walk out in the meadow."

The healer placed the tray on the table. "Don't go too far without a pager. These drawings are interesting. A man?" She held up the drawing in the light from the window.

"Yeah. Not sure where he came from. Hope for the future maybe?" Kalara grabbed at the drawing.

Healer Ropen held the drawing up to the light. "I don't like his grimace, or the woman. She seems upset. The grime isn't healthy either. Maybe an emergency birth in an abandoned town with a man she was escorting somewhere?"

"I don't like it. Or him."

The healer placed the drawing on the table. "Does anyone know where good art comes from?"

"I draw what comes to mind. Since Leonard was implanted, it's been darker. As if I am reliving the ugly time before the Devolution War. And I never saw them. Neither parenta, or grandparenta did. I don't want to bring them back." Kalara covered the building drawing.

Healer Ropen nodded. "Try not to think about it til after Leonard is born."

"Is it dangerous?"

"I don't know. You are not a historian; you shouldn't have these memories. Let me know if they bother you. I'll ask Doctor Janel." She turned and walked out the door.

Kalara nibbled at the pie. Something was wrong. Not something she recognized. Leonard had moved. He shouldn't be ready to be born for another half moon cycle.

Later, she strolled in the meadow with her parenta. "If he comes early, will it be bad for him?"

"No. He's not too early. Half a moon cycle is fine. Perhaps we should go back in?" Her parenta watched her closely.

"I'm okay. Walking feels good."

She held out her hands to touch the flower tips. Bees and butterflies flitted away in front of them. "Tell me about the lean times."

Her parenta rocked on her feet. "I've told you hundreds of times."

She glanced at her parenta. "I want to remember. To tell Leonard."

Her parenta smiled. "My parenta and grandparenta used to tell me of the time when flowers were rare. There wasn't a bee or butterfly to be seen. They were all raised in hot houses for multiple generations."

"No flowers? I thought there were some in the wild." Kalara sat on a stone bench in the middle of the colorful meadow.

"Some." Her parenta sat beside her. "Not many survived the Devolution War. Where they had once grown, the ground had been cleared to grow food. Food didn't grow because the bees and other pollinators were almost gone."

"How did they bring the bees back?"

"Hot houses of flowering vegetables raised to grow hives. That way, nothing hurt or killed the bees. Soon, a few butterflies were

discovered in hidden places, and introduced alongside them. Both species tend to be far more interdependent than they were before they almost died out."

A butterfly landed on Kalara's hand. How could anyone want to hurt these magnificent food producers? "Are there as many species as before?"

"Based on records, we don't have any pre-war species. We do have some new varieties in a few locations where they have genetically changed to better supplement and increase the plant and animal life in their environment."

"I hope we are ready to allow men back in the villages."

"As ready as we will be. Too long, and the consequences will be dire."

"Are we in that serious a situation? We have about a hundred people in our village."

Her parenta covered her eyes with hands. "Already, we have issues with people being too closely related. It is becoming more difficult to find genetic pairings that are distinct enough. I had hundreds to choose from. How many did you choose from?"

"A few dozen. I narrowed my choices. Why didn't they save more from earlier generations?" Kalara lightly waved her hand so the butterfly would fly off.

"They tried. Some weren't compatible. Violent genes were removed from the banks, as were their carriers. Too few men left to begin with, and those that remained were closely related to most of the women who were able to have children. It was a mess. Even now we are on the brink of survival."

The baby kicked.

The brink. So close, to be so far from the Devolution War that almost wiped out the planet. The planet would survive. Along with the current plants and animals. Those who had survived and thrived through the last hundred sun cycles.

A small grey squirrel ran up to the bench with a nut. It dropped the nut in front of her parenta and chattered excessively.

Her parenta laughed. "You take it for lunch. I've planted plenty." She handed the nut to the squirrel.

It grabbed it and held it close. After a few more chatters, it turned and ran off.

Another deep ache forced Kalara to breathe deeply. "I think we better return to my room and call Healer Ropen."

Her parenta nodded. She stood up and held out her hand for Kalara.

Kalara took her parenta's hand. This birth ushered in change. A change that hopefully allowed Galataria to continue on its current track, and not back to the dusty, destructive, war times.

Before long, they were back in the room with Healer Roper and Doctor Janel at her side.

As she drifted in and out of consciousness, she heard a scream that wasn't in the homey room. Kalara felt hands touching her, hands she didn't know. She heard words that while in her native tongue, sounded strange. They didn't belong in this place that should be a peaceful birth with birds singing outside her window. Her brain swirled with color as she tried to return to see her parenta's eyes.

"Do you want to try water birth?" The healer held her hand and looked her in the eye.

Birthing underwater was in some ways more natural than in the dry birthing chair. Easier to stay afloat and let the birth occur. She nodded.

"We'll prepare it."

Her parenta and Healer Ropen led her to the warm tub and helped her into the water. In the warm water she could choose to float, to sit, or to rest on a birthing seat. This ceramic birthing seat in the corner wouldn't move, and she could rest there between labor pains.

Her foot dipped into the nice warm water.

Healer Ropen placed a waterproof pillow on the birthing seat. It was shaped to fit snugly.

Kalara moved over to the birthing seat. She sat on the pillow. The warm water reached almost to her armpits. The level could easily be raised or lowered, and the temperature adjusted as needed. She breathed deeply and allowed her bottom to slide off the pillow so her chin brushed the water's surface.

The birthing process passed slowly. Colors, more than she recognized, swirled as the waters around her. Sounds she couldn't

identify. The occasional bright, too bright light, that she knew wasn't in the room.

Even though her parenta's hand held hers, her hand felt empty. Alone.

Sharp pains she couldn't describe, didn't know, and had no reason to feel. As if she had been hurt in a way she couldn't account for.

Her eyes closed and she held her baby on her chest. Kalara knew he was there. His weight reassured her.

She also felt the stinging in one hand that shouldn't have been there. And a deep exhaustion she had never known. It wasn't a normal exhaustion. And not the kind that most new parentas felt. Of that, she was sure.

Unseen hands lifted the baby from her chest.

Someone helped her from the birthing tub and to her bed.

Her eyes were too heavy to open.

She had looked forward to and longed for the birth of her first child. However, it was marred by something she couldn't understand.

A difficult birth could mean removal from future parenta opportunities. With her parenta's words in floating in her memory, she drifted off to sleep. A deeper sleep than she had ever known.

When she woke, her parenta sat beside her.

Baby Leonard was asleep in a crib beside her. With the yellow blanket she had made for him.

She reached her hand out to touch his face. Her hand ached. The stinging in it hurt and burned. As if on fire. She pulled it back and looked at it. Nothing was visibly wrong.

"I'm here." Her parenta's hand touched hers. The stinging on the back of her hand slowed back to a normal feeling.

"It hurts."

"What hurts?"

Kalara breathed deeply. The air was fresh and clean. No strange scents that she had smelled as Leonard had made his appearance in the world.

She described the unknown feelings, sights, and sounds to her parenta. It took time. Much time. She drifted in and out of sleep as she spoke.

During the telling of her pains and pictures, her parenta leaned back and listened. An emotion Kalara didn't recognize slipped across her face, and back to whence it came.

"I don't know what to think. I'll find out if the Matrilineal Council has any recent records of such places." Her parenta touched Leonard's forehead. "Do you want to hold him?"

Kalara reached her arms out weakly.

The baby nestled in her arms.

She smiled as she traced her fingers around his face. A boy. Who would be raised in a village of women. The hope for future generations.

Chapter 6 - Earth

Jendal's Birth - Shalin Age 35

Beeps interrupted a foggy haze. More beeps. More fog. Figures appeared, turned, retreated. Some held unrecognizable objects in their hands. Various pressures rippled across her body. Some soft, some deep.

More beeps.

A sharp pain rippled through her. Her body tugged away from the pain. It wouldn't stop.

A frantic beep.

Something covered her nose. Someone pressed lightly on her chest. She breathed deeply.

Fog obscured her vision. Something covered her. As she pulled her thoughts together, Shalin realized who she was. Even that had been lost for a while in the fog.

That fog had led to a peaceful place. Butterflies, bees, squirrels. A warm tub, almost large enough to swim in. They all drifted away as the fog cleared.

She tried to move. Her arms and legs were stiff. As she moved her arm, a heavy weight dragged along with it. She turned her head and saw a line attached to a pole. Her eyes opened more. A glance around showed she was in a hospital room. More beeps. Shalin closed her eyes. This was not good. She'd never recover financially from another hospital visit.

A nurse walked into the room. "Awake?"

Shalin opened and closed her eyes. Her tongue was too thick to speak.

The nurse held a drink with a straw. "Take a sip."

She sipped slowly, shifting the water around in her mouth. She turned her head to allow the straw to slip out. "Long?"

"You've been here two days." The nurse placed the drink on a bedside tray.

Shalin groaned. "I don't remember."

The nurse checked the beeping machines and wrote down notes. "What is the last thing you remember?"

The fog gently swished around her. She had gone to work at Dollar Mat. She had filled the blue carts from the day's truck. Something had happened. She had fallen. "The baby?"

The nurse smiled. "He is fine. You lost a lot of blood. And had a concussion. You can see him after the doctor says you are up to it."

"I don't remember labor."

The nurse noted something from one of the machines on Shalin's chart. "You didn't. We had to save him. It was too dangerous to wait."

Shalin groaned. More expense. Would the minimal insurance cover her? And the baby. She couldn't remember all the fine details. She was treading a thin line to manage financially, and not have any expenses the insurance didn't cover. "He's okay?"

"He looks healthy. Passed the basic newborn tests. We can't run a few normal tests without your permission, because insurance doesn't cover it. We don't know if you want to run them." The nurse patted the cover next to her chest.

"No. Unless you believe they are needed." She closed her eyes.

"Not likely. Most kids are fine. You'll need to update your insurance as soon as possible, so he is covered."

"Shouldn't that be automatic?" Shalin groaned. More paperwork. She was too weak to do it today.

"It should be. It never is. We always have to backdate insurance, especially when the baby is born early."

"He wasn't too early." Shalin struggled to stay awake.

"Not too early. Only about two weeks. Insurance makes it complicated." The nurse finished writing down notes and turned to her. "What did you decide to name him?"

She didn't have the strength to think about insurance. "When will the doctor be here so I can see Jendal?"

"That's a nice name." The nurse made a notation on her notepad. "I'm not sure. Maybe tomorrow."

"Why not today?" Shalin blinked. Her arms were too heavy to move.

"He only visits on Tuesdays and Thursdays."

"That doesn't add up."

"Sometimes they have to throw an extra day in there. I have other patients to care for." The nurse walked out of the room and left the door open.

People talked loudly walking up and down the hall. Machines beeped. Multiple machines all along the hallway. Something scraped the floor. It sounded like fingernails on a chalkboard as it screeched through the hall. A toddler tumbled into her room and grabbed at the IV pole. An adult grabbed the child, released its hand, and carried it out the door without speaking.

Shalin groaned and rolled over. Too much noise and commotion. Not a place to recover from what had happened.

Loud talking interrupted a dream of searing heat and pain. She opened her eyes to one of her co-workers.

"You okay?"

"I'm here." Shalin couldn't grin. It hurt when she tried. Honestly, a noisy, odorous hospital was not a place a person would be if they were okay.

"The police have the video. Will you press charges?"

"It wouldn't do any good." Shalin covered her eyes to look more clearly at the young woman.

"Not likely. It'd be a year or more before it went to court. Then, you'd have to miss a few weeks of work for the case to be heard. Likely lose your job, whatever one you have then. Nor be able to pay your bills."

"Not to mention, placing my address on public record. He could track me down and kill me and my son, right?"

"Yeah. Dangerous isn't it?" She sat down in the chair by the bed. "Feels so unsafe."

"Why are you here?" Shalin shifted her position to better see her co-worker.

The woman stared at her. "I wanted to know how you are doing."

"Shouldn't you be working?"

"The boss above our boss fired everyone working that day." She covered her eyes and burst into tears.

Shalin closed her eyes. She had known her job was lost when the baby was born. It was unfair, and likely illegal, that everyone else had lost their job.

It also meant her extra insurance terminated that day. They wouldn't pay for the ambulance, hospital, or cesarean section. She sighed. None of the bills covered. That could easily make the bill

over $200,000, more money than she had ever made, in over a decade of working. Or expected to in an entire lifetime. The genetic study insurance covered "normal" expected expenses. Not an ambulance, extra hospital days, or the cesarean section.

"What can I do?" Not that there was much she could do, stuck in a hospital bed.

The woman mumbled. "I know where you live. You can't help us."

"Will you qualify for unemployment?"

"No. I did from the last job."

Only a few months of unemployment were allowed for multiple years of work. How many was it now? The government had tried to up it to only months of unemployment per decade of work. Shalin groaned. It had been that way for too long. A downward spiral for those who worked at the mercy of unreliable employers.

"I don't even have a job for me. How can I help you? Stuck here." Shalin reached her hand to the woman much younger, and sicker, than herself.

"I don't know. Everyone says you have the answers. You know people." She grabbed the mattress.

Shalin looked closer. This hospital bed didn't even have the rails to keep her from rolling out of bed. Scary. She'd have to be careful about movement. Especially rolling over. Bed sores where a high probability.

"I don't have the answers. I don't know people. I wish I did. I wouldn't be here if I did."

"The baby."

Shalin smiled. The baby. The boy gave her hope. A dream of a brighter world. When she thought of him, she often sensed something different. A place with light, trees, and a multitude of smells she didn't recognize. "I haven't seen him. I hope they bring my baby in soon."

"Is he healthy?"

"I hope so." She smiled. A hope. A dream. A future. At least with a child, she'd qualify for food and housing programs. Even employers would be more willing to give her a job. And keep her, since she had a child to support. She had lost far too many jobs to someone less qualified who needed the money more, merely because they had a child, and she didn't have one.

She'd qualify for jobs because she had a child to support. And no other qualifications.

The woman glanced back at the door. "Guess I'll be going then. I had hoped." She pulled herself out of the chair with difficulty and limped to the door.

"Have you had the limp checked?"

She turned back. "No one will check it without insurance. It may be nothing. Or, it may be cancer. No way to find out. All I know, is it hurts too bad to walk steady." She hobbled out of the room.

Shalin closed her eyes. Too true. She drifted back to sleep.

When she made it home, she'd have to contact Dr. Newell at Emerging Lineages to find out about the insurance coverage.

The next time she woke up, there was a pen and a pad of paper beside her.

Beeps continued at a steady rate.

Shalin reached for the paper. She tried to write. The right hand was the one with the IV in. The IV line banged against the paper and kept pushing the pages out of reach. She reached to the lift button and pushed to raise the head of the bed.

The bed squeaked and squawked as it raised a few inches before it quit.

Shalin pushed the nurse call button. Time to make a few notes before a nurse arrived. Perhaps more than enough time to write all her needs down. If her hand could hold the paper and pen long enough.

Her rent had to be paid, she couldn't do that from here. It was due any day. She had planned to pay up two months that afternoon. The last day she had worked.

Groceries needed to be bought. And delivered. She couldn't carry them until she recovered. At least there was nothing in her fridge that would spoil. There hadn't been anything left. Not even a drop of the spoiled milk.

Insurance coverage. She'd have to call about that. Talk to someone to backdate the insurance to her son's birth date.

A different younger nurse stuck her head and one hand inside the door. "Yes?"

"May I see my baby?"

She glanced out the door and down the hall. "Not sure Dr. Grendal has been in to see you. However, there is no reason not to

let you see the baby. The nursery is full." She stepped back out and hurried down the hall.

Shalin placed the pen on the paper beside her. Maybe someone here, or her former co-worker, could help her at least find groceries.

The nurse arrived with the newborn. She placed him in Shalin's arms.

Shalin touched his tiny forehead. A little lighter than her own hand. So tiny. So full of hope. The logical plan that hadn't quite worked out. Like so many before him. She had hope as long as he was by her side.

"He looks good." The nurse tapped the paper pad. "Would you like to move this to the table?"

Shalin nodded. Words weren't needed at the moment. Bonding with her baby was.

The young nurse patted the baby's head and walked out of the room smiling.

Shalin nodded off to sleep holding Jendal.

A sound woke her. A tall and too thin woman wearing a name tag stood beside her bed. Shalin tried to move. The baby shifted. She grabbed him before he could fall.

"Are you okay?" The woman perched on the uncomfortable and patched chair next to the bed.

Shalin tried to nod. The medications she was on made movement difficult. Dizziness. Her empty hand calmed the habitual motion.

The woman spoke her name. "I'm the hospital social worker. Here to help."

Shalin nodded. Would the woman help? She might try to take Jendal away from her. Everything she knew about her foster parents implied the second. She couldn't allow them to take him.

"I saw your notepad here. Are these the things you need?"

"Yes. It was unexpected."

"You were attacked at work. That's understandable. You are worried about your insurance?"

"Yes. They fired everyone working at Dollar Mat that day."

The woman touched Jendal's hand. "He is very pretty. Was your insurance through them?"

Shalin nodded. Then shook her head. It wasn't. It was through a plan with Dr. Newell. "I forgot. I do have a plan. I have to contact Dr. Newell."

The woman smiled. "We can find him for you."

"I'll call him when I am able to go home."

"We will contact your landlord and have them wait on rent due for a few days, if you give me their information."

"I have it in my phone."

"Let me know if I need to send verification you are in the hospital. And we will help you grocery pick up and delivery one time when you are able to leave." The woman stood and waved before she left.

Shalin drifted back to sleep. In the dream, her landlord gave her one week to pay for the next two months. She groaned. Someone was needed to help with the rent. Maybe the co-worker who had also been fired, if she could find her after she returned home.

There was a card. One she had been given that day. She drifted into a deeper sleep. A dream of peace, with birds, butterflies, and deer.

Chapter 7 - Galataria

Leonard - Age 1

The charged tablet beeped. More information appeared about the village Kalara's of the man who had trained her parenta to make wood instruments.

She touched the tiny woodwind, one of the last her parenta made before her hands began to shake too much to do so. She could only make larger items now, nothing so delicate as this. It was sad. It had taken far into her third apprenticeship to learn the skills to make something so delicate. And even then, she only made a few before her hands could no longer manage the tools for so delicate an instrument.

Kalara picked it up and blew lightly into the mouth hole.

Leonard looked up and clapped his hands together soundlessly.

She tilted her head and began to play, using her left hand on the three holes to make a soft melody. One that resembled bird song.

Leonard smiled and bounced to the sound.

Kalara smiled and played more. She peeked at the window.

Birds danced outside, watching and listening. A few bounced up to the openings at the top of the walls. The ones where the house heat exited, and tilted downward to warm their nests. Other birds plopped to the ground, a few recent nestlings danced at the bottom vents, listening, and risking a chill as the cooler outside air whistled lightly around them into the house. Some adult birds swooped up and down, as they checked on nestlings and the fledglings on the ground while enjoying the music.

After a few moments, she stopped and placed the instrument on the table beside her. It was fun to entertain her son and the birds for short songs. Her music was not as good as those who practiced and played frequently.

Leonard turned back to the small sticks he had collected. He had stacked them to look like the small wall between the house and woods. He placed another stick on the end to show how it tilted toward the ground. Though, perhaps it hadn't always. Based on a story her parenta had told her.

She shifted back to the stories her parenta had shared and checked the pages her search had brought up. The village of Nally had been one of the few given the right to remain living as their ancestors had. With everyone living close together. The Matrilineal Council had followed up every sun cycle for a generation to verify they harbored no dangerous men. And to verify the women and children were not suffering from them.

Those words struck fear in her soul. Danger from men was forgotten. A remnant of the Devolution War living people had never known. However, the fear of it was ever present. In all the laws. In every path in society. There were reminders. Reminders of lost knowledge, knowledge once held either by those dangerous men, or the ones they had destroyed to be sure useful knowledge was forgotten.

Kalara hadn't been a historian. It was certainly one skill she enjoyed researching. In fact, historian would make a good third apprenticeship. If she studied well, maybe she could find the reason for the dreams. The scenes that seemed to be more than dreams, that included men in places they shouldn't be. Broken-down towns and what appeared to be active cities. Something from nearly forgotten history.

She switched back to the charged tablet to make a few notes to begin her search for a historian trainer to study with from home. That should be easy enough. One she could work with while caring for her son. Preferably an excellent trainer that worked in early light. Mid light and late light were for family time and exercise.

Leonard gurgled as he crawled over to watch the fledgling birds by the open vents.

She checked the time. It was almost time to take him for his one sun cycle checkup.

Leonard wasn't walking. Which was normal. Talkies tended to walk earlier. A friend's parenta used to recite, early walker, early talker, reacts before thinking, leaps without looking. Late talker, late walker, early thinker, early learner.

Her smile increased. Leonard would be like her.

The zone cart arrived on time to take them to the clinic.

Her parenta could have taken them in her own solar cart. However, Kalara wanted to do this on her own. Even if she didn't

need, or want a solar cart. Other than a few times a sun cycle, she didn't need one of her own. A zone cart was better.

The runner handed her a bag of items she had ordered and waited for her to put them away before she brought Leonard out. The wait gave the runner a chance to eat a snack.

The runner pulled up to the clinic doors. "Your return home will be my last stop. Going to drop off a few things for someone nearby and will be back soon."

"Thanks. I'll have Healer Ropen message you." Kalara pulled Leonard out of the seat and into her arms. He was becoming heavy. Maybe early walkers did have one advantage. Nope. She remained glad he wasn't an early walker.

The lady smiled as she drove off.

Kalara placed Leonard in one of the double buffers. She sat beside him. She turned on the birdsong. Something they both enjoyed listening to. Birdsong floated softly between the double buffered seats.

He glanced up at the buffers. Then lifted his head to view something on the ceiling.

Kalara looked up. Small butterfly sculptures fluttered near the ceiling. She hadn't noticed them before.

He smiled and pointed.

Something hit her knee. A brightly dressed toddler had grabbed her knee and held on. The girl giggled and pointed at Leonard.

Another parenta arrived to take the young girl away. She muttered something.

Kalara's heart fluttered. Too much action. What had the woman said? Was she supposed to respond? How was she supposed to respond? She leaned out of the buffer.

The woman sat across the room holding her child on her lap. She smiled at Kalara. Her lips mouthed, "Sorry."

Kalara leaned back into the seat. The song relaxed her until she dozed. Her blood pressure reading was higher than at home, if the buffers recording was accurate.

Healer Ropen called her and Leonard's name. It whispered through the buffer's birdsong.

Her hand hovered over the off button. The birdsong ended.

Leonard looked up at her and held out his arms.

She lifted him up to carry him toward the healer. He was a little heavier than she was comfortable carrying.

He held onto her shoulder and watched the ceiling as she walked to Healer Ropen.

"How are you both?" The healer checked her charged tablet. She then directed them into the hall. "Room 4, red line."

"Fine." Kalara's hand found the red line and followed it to the room. She walked in and sat on the seat. Leonard sat calmly beside her. His hands fluttered in a finger game he played. He made no attempt to move from the chair.

Doctor Janel walked into the room and sat on the swivel chair to listen to them.

She wouldn't have to repeat everything twice, or more, as she had seen in a strange dream the night before. Doctor Janel would listen closely. She always had.

Healer Ropen closed the door. "One sun cycle checkup?"

Kalara nodded.

"Anything new to report?"

She shook her head.

The healer made a note on her charged tablet. She picked up a skill finder toy and handed it to Leonard. He didn't reach for it, or make a sound. "Good. He doesn't try to take things away from other people. Does he smile, babble, or crawl?"

"A little. That's normal." Kalara accepted the toy and placed it on Leonard's lap. Normal for her, and those she knew. Some women were different. More talkie and social. They had to be to meet some societal needs. Doctor and healers, constantly around other people. She shuddered.

Her son touched a few spots on the toy, and grabbed the string to twirl it in front of him. Up and down to the floor.

Healer Ropen reached for the skill finder. "You were a silent child."

"Silence is good." Kalara smiled at her son. He never cried, or disturbed her while she worked. He never caused any problems. Simply was there. Exploring the world with his eyes, brain, and hands. Learning as much as possible before he interacted with people and things around him.

"Tell me about some of his interests?"

"He likes to listen to birds, and play with sticks he gathers. He followed an ant trail a few light cycles ago almost to the yard wall."

Doctor Janel wrote a few notes. "Sounds as if he is a happy child."

Kalara nodded.

Doctor Janel reached out for the infant. She tilted her head at his lack of response to being taken from his parenta, weighed, and having his temperature checked. "His height is normal. Weight gain a low normal for his height. Did he recently have a growth spurt?"

"Last quarter moon."

"Good. Any issues?"

"No." Thankfully, he was quiet and listened. He hadn't gone head first into trouble like some talkie girls she had heard of. And a few of the new boys being raised by women in other villages. They were discussed on some forums. Women who didn't know any talkies seemed to have the most difficulty with talkie children.

The doctor and healer had probably been as talkie as the toddler girl in the waiting room. Which was why they could do their skill so easily.

"Not even crying when hungry?"

Kalara closed her eyes and thought back. "Not even once. I followed your directions to try to go as long as I could manage without feeding him one time. After all of early light and mid light, no sound from him."

"Good." The doctor made a few notes. She glanced back through her case files. "Are you confident with his development?"

Kalara nodded. Even her parenta was comfortable with it. Though her parenta had sighed once when he refused to babble to her.

"I'll bring in some equipment to test his vision and hearing."

Kalara watched the doctor perform multiple simple tests on Leonard.

His response to a light pointed at his eye was to look closer. He didn't blink. The next test measured what his eyes should be able to see with some accuracy.

"His vision is fine. We will do a more in-depth check before his first apprenticeship." The doctor added a few notes to her tablet.

She then hooked up a headphone apparatus to his head. After a few minutes, she looked over at Kalara. "Hearing is signing normal."

Doctor Janel made a few changes and checked it again. "In fact, he may be able to higher tones than normal."

"That's good."

"Nothing shows up as any issue. Blood work from a few cycles ago didn't pick up anything we have in the database." Doctor Janel looked back at her screen. "I will run another hearing test. It'll have to wait until he is two. It will more clearly measure responses to higher and lower ranges of sounds than this one. You take it every few sun cycles, don't you?"

Kalara nodded. Leonard would be like her. Hear the sounds others couldn't hear. See that which others missed. Share his voice through art. Perhaps painting, drawing, music, or sculpture. A few signers spoke primarily in strange dialects, perhaps from the depths of the planet. She liked to draw. Her drawings were rather dark now, and hidden from view. She had too many hidden.

The doctor consulted her calendar. "We have a Silent Discovery class beginning in three light cycles. We allow three per training group. Will you be able to attend?"

Kalara nodded. Training with her son would reconnect her to the training style, forgotten knowledge and skills, she had known as a child. With their help, she'd be a better parenta.

"Good. Some parentas need a quarter moon cycle, or so to be able to put their lives in order to attend. Does Leonard have any artistic interests?"

Kalara reached for baby Leonard's hands to take him from the doctor. "I've not found any with music, poetry, or art. Only building."

"That's fine. Do you need any help?"

She closed her eyes. "Thank you." She picked up the infant and walked out of the office. The healers smiled at her as she passed them. They'd be there if she needed them.

Leonard's weight hurt her back. So different from the woman and son she dreamed of. She shuddered. That woman and her son stayed in a dank, dark place, with no light or sunshine. The woman's emotions were dark, like Kalara had never felt in her own life. The woman she dreamed of left a weight in her brain that she could not explain, reach, or remove.

Chapter 8 - Earth

Jendal - Age 1

The stained plastic table sagged next to the counter. Its lazy leg leaned inward and wouldn't hold it up anymore. With a push under the counter, and the loss of two drawers and cabinets to hold it almost steady, they had a place to eat.

Shalin placed a small bowl of oatmeal on the table. No protein. Not a healthy breakfast. Something to keep her going. There wasn't enough money for a healthy breakfast.

Clare rolled over and groaned on the cot she and Irma alternated sleeping hours in. It blocked the stove, so she couldn't cook a healthy breakfast if she had healthy food to cook. Nor could they count on the water to be running in the single sink to wash pots and pans. Or time to wash them.

Zalena and Irma would be in soon from working as night desk clerks at the hotel. They'd need their rest before the next night shift.

"Clare."

"Don't wanna. Only got to sleep."

"Zalena won't like it. She'll want to fix something for her and Irma."

Clare groaned and stretched. "I'll wake up when they return." She snuggled back under the tattered covers.

Shalin sighed. Her life had changed so much in the last year. Three new roommates in the tiny kitchen apartment. Four, if you counted Jendal. She hadn't had a choice. The medical bills from her hospital stay were more than she had made in the last four years combined. How could anyone ever manage to pay off $200,000, plus interest, greater than the required monthly payments the insurance hadn't covered?

He was their hope. Their dream of a promised future forgotten. They all took turns watching him, when they weren't working.

One car to share between the four of them. One apartment. Two beds. Alternating sleeping and working schedules so someone was always with Jendal. It worked. Most of the time. The noise and confusion were too much for her, and especially Jendal.

Clare rolled over on her stomach. "Will you drop me off today?"

Shalin looked up from her last sip of watery oatmeal. "Drop you off at eight, and take Jendal for his one-year appointment."

"Is he awake?"

"I think he is drifting to awakeness. It's the few minutes of quiet he has each day. He seems to value it."

Clare sighed and sat up, pulling the second-hand lightweight blanket around her shoulders. One shoulder poked through a hole large enough for her head. "Guess I better get up. Anything other than oatmeal today?"

"Not unless Zalena and Irma bring something from the hotel kitchens."

"Not too likely then." Clare struggled to pull herself out of the unwieldy cot without tipping it over.

Her friend left the kitchen for the tacked-on bathroom between the once spacious kitchen and no longer elegant dining room. It wasn't that they didn't clean it. It needed more work than they could afford in order to keep it in good working order. And five people living in the two rooms made it crowded. Difficult to work around. Especially with their sleep schedule. Everyone was awake together a few hours in the evenings.

Shalin's mind drifted to that other time and place, as it frequently did. The peaceful place. A world that only existed in the mind. Not reality. A boy, similar to hers sat in a sunbeam. The scene shifted to one of a sofa-chair with music for the boy and his mother. A silent waiting room somewhere. Only the birdsong played. A soft birdsong, not an eagle's high-pitched call.

Something tapped her knee.

She glanced down.

Jendal was beside her. He didn't speak. And waited.

"Want some breakfast?"

He glanced at the cabinet where his cereal was stored.

She stood up to reach it. It was so easy talking to him. Unlike other kids. They tended to bounce, scream, and move constantly. Jendal didn't. He was calm and quiet. He listened. He watched her and the other adults constantly.

Shalin hurried to dress while he ate.

If he was so different, was it a good different? Would it cause him problems as he grew up?

She remembered the two overcrowded dressers that held the clothes of four women and one little boy. No closets here. And no tv, or toys, for her little boy. Other than tattered Bunny. All of her extra money was spent to pay the medical bills from his birth. Probably for the rest of her life.

She folded her sleeping outfit and placed it on top of a small cardboard box beside the bed. A day off meant a loss of income, since she wouldn't be working. A loss of $20. Plus, an additional loss of $50 in copay for the one-year wellness exam. A total of seventy dollars she wouldn't have to pay down the hospital bills plus interest. Or her normal daily and monthly bills.

At least she had Clare, Irma, and Zalena for help with the day to day bills. Not that any of them had much money left at the end of each paycheck. They also had their own medical bills, and a total of three student loans between the four adults to pay on. With no evidence that the owed amount ever decreased, no matter how much was paid.

After dropping Clare off at the hotel to work as a housekeeper, and barely on time at that, Shalin drove to the tiny crowded lot next to the clinic. Few of the clients even had vehicles, so they only had a few spaces beyond employee parking behind the building.

The last parking space available was mostly gravel, with some drying grass sticking up around the edges. One car tire landed in a hole deep enough to be difficult to back out of.

Shalin sighed. The day hadn't begun nicely. And this didn't bode well either.

It took several minutes to disconnect Jendal from his reused car seat gifted by another co-worker at the hotel whose last child could no longer fit into it. It had carried three or four toddlers. The straps were dilapidated. And tended to tie in knots. Jendal always grabbed the loosened straps and wouldn't let go without coaxing. "Jendal, time to go."

He shook his head and pulled the straps closer.

She tapped his hands.

He let go. His eyes closed and he looked away.

She pulled him out of the car and trudged toward the clinic. As she stumbled across the loose pavement and rocks, she watched the parked cars, and the frightening alley between the buildings.

That alley was dark and littered. Sometimes clients rested in the shade there before the next bus home. Today, none were there. She walked around to the front of the clinic without stepping on someone's legs as they sat against one building, or the other.

The cacophony of voices inside the clinic could be heard before she reached the missing door.

A mangy child ran out into the nearly deserted street.

Once inside the clinic, Jendal grabbed her shoulders and slammed his face into her chest.

She joined the line to sign in. It was the same broken clipboard that held the sign in sheet. This time, there was fresh blood on the sign in sheet from the person before her. The man had been startled by a small child banging into him as he signed in. The unknown man yelped and grabbed his hand as he plodded to an empty chair.

The broken chair had joined a few others in a corner. They were on their sides, no longer even able to lean in a drunken manner. Sharp bits of metal poked out, right at eye level of the toddlers playing hide and seek around them.

After three hours of constant noise, and a silently crying Jendal, she was called back to join another line in the hallway. Here the children were muffled. Hanging onto the knees of the adults they were with, staring into space. A few of the adults, mostly women, had two or three small children with them.

Most of the women were tired. They stared vacantly at the wall or ceiling. The variety of uniforms portrayed they had either left from work to bring the children, or expected to work after their appointments. Many wore housekeeping style or fast food uniforms. One had a mixed uniform. Her outfit looked like a nurse outfit with a fast food hat on her head.

Shalin tried to smile at them. Speaking, or even saying hello was too much effort. Not that any of the other adults had spoken. Even to the children with them.

Jendal had not spoken at all today. He rarely did. She shifted him on her lap. Her shirt was soaked from his tears. He had shown no interest in the other children. Even when one little boy had run by him and pulled on his leg. It only made him look at the boy as if he wanted to cry more.

Deep down, she knew he thought he had done something wrong to be brought here. This place was scary. Ultra-bright lights, then sudden darkness in the dim hallway. Lots of noise and constant motion. Enough to frighten anyone. Especially a child who did not process light and sound the same way other people did. Although she didn't understand it, she recognized the difference. Somehow, it was familiar. Darkness and sound overwhelmed her. The sensation of pain. Difficult to describe, or locate.

Twenty adults and nearly as many children were individually called into one of the two exam rooms. Each time one group left, another group joined them in the hallway. After two more hours in the dim hallway they were called in.

The nurse never announced her own name. She grabbed Jendal from Shalin's arms, plopped him down on the exam table, and stuck several needles in him without saying a word. She then left the room.

Shalin was shocked. Most of the nurses at least said something.

Dr. Grendal shuffled in and left the door wide open.

A toddler ran by outside.

The doctor checked Jendal's chart. The man didn't glance at the toddler. "He turned out fine. You may go. You will receive a reminder for your next visit." He snapped the chart shut and strode out the door with the chart in his hand.

Shalin couldn't move. What had they given her son without even asking? She needed to know. The appointment reminder hadn't said what shots were due.

A nurse bounded into the room. "Your time is over. Please leave so the next patient can be seen." She grabbed Jendal and plopped him back into Shalin's arms.

Shalin stood up and walked out. Less than ten minutes for the appointment. After a five hour wait. A whole day lost. And no chance to ask any questions. She turned back as the nurse ushered the next patient into the room. "Nurse, I need to see his chart, please."

The nurse glared at her. "Why? You wouldn't be able to read it." She closed the door on herself, a woman, and two young children.

At the checkout desk the receptionist was rude. Even with insurance, she wanted $200 for the visit and unknown shots. That was two weeks income for shots and no care at all. Less than ten

minutes in the exam room. A whole day of lost pay, an additional week's income, lost time, and lost hope for her only child.

This wasn't the future she had dreamed of when she decided to have a child. A child she greatly wanted. A hope for the future. A hope that now appeared grim indeed.

Hours later, after picking up Clare, she cried on her bed. While Zalena slept next to her.

Jendal reached over and patted her shoulder.

She looked up.

A smile tugged at his cheeks. It wasn't much. He handed her his dirty and well-worn yellow Bunny. The only toy he had, and it had been given to him by someone they barely knew who felt sorry for him as an infant with no toys.

Chapter 9 - Galataria

Leonard - Age 1

Silent Discovery class for Leonard began at mid light. Kalara would need a stroll in the woods to relax her before being around people, even if it was only three parentas and their children.

Leonard rested on his blanket in a sunbeam. His right hand reached for the skill finder, and his left grasped at dust particles that floated by.

Kalara smiled. She remembered doing that as a child. Even now, she sometimes reached into the light to touch the larger particles. They danced in the slight sunshiny breeze.

Ground and ceiling vents kept the fresh air flowing within the home. Although it was warm outside, inside stayed cool, as air from the shady trees pushed in and pushed the heat out through the upper vents.

A bird shadow floated across the window. A small red bird floated to its nest next to one of the ceiling vents. The pretty red bird didn't have to perch on her eggs as often because the house warmth helped keep the eggs warm. Which meant more time and energy spent feeding the hatchlings. The nesting ledge Kalara and her parenta had added was wide enough for most song birds to build a nest on. The ledge circled the house above the windows.

Kalara looked down at her son. "Leonard, do you want to go for a walk?"

He glanced toward her right shoulder, then away. His fingers let go of the skill finder and it jingled. The saw toy jumped the most.

She smiled. He acknowledged her. He didn't stare into her eyes as talkies did. A glance toward her shoulder that let her know he heard her. Perfect reflex.

Kalara pulled on her shoes. A sturdy moss colored construction made from a specially grown plant related to the grasses under her window. So different from the strange looking shiny shoes she had seen on the other woman and her son. The dreams kept coming. Clearer with each vision. It was almost as if she knew this woman as much as she knew herself.

She reached down to pick up Leonard.

He smiled and patted the sunbeam as he was lifted upward to her arms.

The sunbeam was as much his friend as the song birds outside the window that sang them awake and asleep.

She stepped out of the house to a sunlit glade. Two stone benches rested at the opening to her preferred trail.

Leonard reached for one.

She sat him down on the mossy bench. He touched the moss and giggled. His weight was more than she could comfortably carry for long. The push cart nestled against the house. She walked back to push it to him.

He pointed at the trail.

She placed him in the cart. The walk down the trail relaxed her more than usual. Squirrels ran from tree to tree, and one dropped a nut in Leonard's lap. Birds chattered. Other small mammals hurried across the trail on life's errands.

She stopped at the small pond. Another mossy bench overlooked the water. This pond had a history. It had been accidentally created during the Devolution War. Her own great grandparenta had cleared it of the deadly device deposited there. Now the pond gave life to the forest that had been planted around it.

A doe and her offspring stepped out of the cover of the trees and stepped forward for a drink. The fawn stepped over to the cart and dripped fresh water down onto Leonard's chin.

He giggled and reached to touch the fawn's dripping chin.

The fawn gazed at him, nosed his hands away, and trotted back to his parenta.

Kalara smiled. Tales told of a time when deer were few, and weary of people. Even in her parenta's childhood, the wild animals had kept their distance from people, especially the longer-lived species.

A flash, and a view from that other time, other place, other woman appeared. The woman wore torn clothes and sat on a ripped chair. The child at her feet had only his bottom covered and he stared at something in the distance. Something Kalara could not see in the shadowy place she was.

It was time to return home to go to Silent Discovery. Not something she enjoyed. Leonard was so like herself; he probably wouldn't enjoy it either.

Silent Discovery was to be held in the local birthing center. The same place little Leonard had been born. At least she knew her way around it, and was somewhat comfortable there. A moon cycle had not been quite enough to be relaxed around the other parentas. If the greeters had changed, it would be even more uncomfortable. Asking a new person's name was something she never wanted to do. She should know everyone in the village. A few moved in or out every few sun cycles. Especially the talkies who were more likely to apprentice in healthcare before moving on to other villages.

She lifted Leonard out of the zone cart.

Healer Ropen was at the building door to open it for her. "Hello Kalara and Leonard."

Kalara walked past her. Healer Ropen was a nice enough. However, the healer tended to want to chat more than necessary. She glanced around the lobby. Neither of the other parentas were there. She placed Leonard down on a chair where the kid's games were. He reached for a loose curl. She glanced up.

Healer Ropen had probably expected a reply from her. She had forgotten to respond. The healer was not in sight. Probably outside waiting on the other two parentas.

She sat on the ground beside Leonard. The games were interesting. A few matching puzzles, small rectangles of an ancient forgotten substance, and wind chimes. One on a long string danced softly in the breeze of the air vents. Kalara touched a string to listen to the tinny tinkle it made.

The door opened again and two women walked in, each with a baby close to Leonard's age. They strolled over without saying a word and sat near her.

Kalara breathed deeply. They were supposed to talk. Not something she wanted to do. And not knowing these people, what would she say?

Healer Ropen joined them. She sat in a chair nearby. "I'll be here if you need me. We will go out to the meadow after puzzle and game time." She glanced at each of them and leaned back in her chair with a charged tablet.

Kalara glanced at the other two parentas. Both had daughters. They each looked away from her and toward the windows. The daughters appeared a little older than Leonard.

She pulled a puzzle box off the shelf and carried it over to the corner. After bringing Leonard to her, she opened the box. It was a small wooden puzzle from the pre-war time. A few pieces for Leonard to practice with. Some were missing. She handed the fist sized pieces to him and glanced out the window. So peaceful out there. Away from people and the murmur of voices in the hallway of the birthing center.

Leonard tapped her knee with a puzzle piece.

She took the offered piece and packed the puzzle away for someone else's child.

They watched out the window until Healer Ropen called their names.

"First, we will practice some sign language." Healer Ropen called out vocal words and waited for each parenta to sign to her child.

"Tap their fingers, see if they return the sign."

Kalara focused on the training. She hadn't practiced signing recently since she primarily worked through her charged tablet. Communication with her own parenta, Healer Ropen, and Doctor Janel was spoken since that was their preferred style. Her signs were rusty.

"Bird."

Kalara formed the sign for bird.

Leonard giggled and repeated it.

"Meal."

Kalara formed the sign and repeated the word in a whisper.

Leonard replied with the signs, "No meal."

They both giggled.

More words and phrases were repeated. Some duplicated.

Kalara turned away when she was tired. She hadn't practiced in too long. Perhaps, she needed to practice with some of her forum friends.

Dr. Ropen walked to the side door and held it open. "It's time for us all to go outside."

Kalara pulled Leonard closer to her. So far neither of the other parentas had made an attempt at speaking to her. Outside, they might be more likely to.

Both of the other parentas also pulled their babies closer to them as they stood up and strolled outside.

Kalara followed them out. Birds sang on the nesting platforms on the building. Butterflies fluttered by.

Leonard reached his hand out to a bird as it fluttered too close. He giggled as its wings brushed his fingertips.

Outside time continued, with infant giggles and parentas speaking softly only to their own infant.

Healer Ropen stayed nearby, observing, and occasionally speaking to each of them.

Thankfully, group time ended without unnecessary chatter. The one aspect she had dreaded about being around other people. These parentas were much like her, and not the socialites her own parenta craved as friends. They understood communication without words, even if it was haltingly. They each transferred thoughts and feelings in their own way, and would soon learn to communicate with each other without unnecessary spoken words.

Chapter 10 - Earth

Jendal - Age 1

A few weeks had passed. Shalin had dreamed of the young mother and her son toddling through a field of flowers. She had never seen so many flowers in the world. Not even in an entire lifetime. Butterflies and other small critters roamed among the grasses not at all disturbed by the woman and child.

Something about them was familiar. That feeling. The more she thought about them, the more she reviewed the various memories she had of the bright and sunny world the woman and child lived in. There was light and color everywhere. Not overwhelming and garish as she often saw. The woman spent little time around other people. Mostly, one older woman who may have been her mother. There was sound, always sound. Except, she rarely saw the woman, or child, speak. Their sounds seemed to be exclamations of joy and happiness. Words were seldom spoken, except with other people.

Her mind raced back through the memories as she sat on the bench at the park. Jendal sat by her feet. He lifted his hand and waved it at her. Except. It wasn't really a wave. His fist closed and then opened. He waited as if expecting something.

A painfully loud sound distracted her. A flagman waved a dump truck filled with gravel into the parking lot nearby.

She nodded. Of course, Jendal was developing his own sign language. Somehow, she usually knew what his hand waves meant. This one was different. That was how he communicated. For now, at least. He'd need some words to manage a job and future in the world they lived in.

She picked Jendal up and walked to Zalena's car. The rest of her roommates had to make do without transportation until evening. It was a two-hour trip each way to the geneticist clinic. At least it was only a few blocks away from the park they had eaten lunch in.

Another day off work. Another day with no income. This park had seemed like a nice stop for lunch. Especially with most of the playground equipment broken. Swing chains waved in the breeze. No swing seats hung from the tangled chains. The slide had broken

and leaned on two legs, not attached at the top, and one bottom leg six inches out of the ground. No other kids or adults had been there. Until the beeping dump truck arrived.

The beeps hurt. Almost as much as the constant chatter at a restaurant. Not that she could have afforded restaurant food.

She arrived at Emerging Lineages. Jendal looked toward the large open doors. The glass appeared clean, though it had a dark film on it so no one could see inside.

When she entered, the spacious and well-lit waiting room was nearly empty. Except for one pair of spiffily dressed adults and a female toddler in a too short party dress about Jendal's age. They sat near an activity center filled with toddler appropriate toys.

Jendal pulled away from her to run to the toys. He picked up a building set and prepared to pound on the roof of the playhouse.

Shalin smiled and turned to the receptionist.

This woman smiled at her, even though she was on the phone. She nodded to the sign in clipboard. A safe, clean one. No blood, rust, or broken metal.

After signing in, Shalin looked around at the walls. Fresh and clean. No dirt, grime, or dust. Glossy, whole posters on the wall. No notices were ripped, and hanging from dried out tape. There was a tall divider for an area for people who waited and hoped for news about their genetic testing.

"Are you okay today?"

Shalin looked back toward the receptionist. "I'm fine."

She smiled. "You may have a seat. Dr. Newell will see you soon. If you need coffee or water while you wait, let me know."

"Coffee would be nice."

"Which flavor?" The receptionist pointed to a sign that listed four coffee flavors, plain, hazelnut, caramel, and mocha.

"Hazelnut please." Flavored coffee was a treat to treasure for months.

The receptionist brewed a medium sized cup and handed it to her. "Let me know if you need anything for Jendal."

"Thanks. He's busy playing." Shalin smiled back. She walked over to the area where the two toddlers played. Jendal ignored the girl, even though they played side by side.

The little girl talked frequently. Her parents couldn't even read a magazine she interrupted them so often. She tapped Jendal on the shoulder, trying to force him to listen to her.

He pulled back and took his toys to another side of the play house.

The little girl's parents looked at him. Before glaring at Shalin. "Aren't you going to make him to share?"

She glanced at Jendal. A scowl had formed on his face. "Why? There are hundreds of toys here that she can play with. More than he has ever seen. She has plenty to choose from."

The parent's shocked expressions said more than words. Of course, they expected Jendal to give the girl his hammer and find something else.

This flashed back to a toddler memory of hers. Except, instead of being left alone, the boy had beaten her to steal the single toy she was playing with when there were plenty to go around.

Would she have felt differently if the toddler's genders were reversed? Perhaps, if she was used to having what she wanted when she wanted it. However, when there was plenty to go around without taking from another, she'd prefer children learn to be satisfied with what they had, or what was available, until they were ready to trade.

A nurse opened a side door and called out the name of the other couple. They grabbed their daughter's hands and jerked her toward the door.

The girl's toys dropped out of her hands and she squealed. Her sharp cries echoed as she was pulled into the hallway.

Shalin sighed. Not an encounter she wanted to repeat. Similar obstacles would repeat many times, and in many ways, as her son grew up. Especially when he went school.

Jendal did not seem affected. He had ignored the girl being pulled off by her parents. And the scream. Or had he? Deep down she knew he'd never forget what he had seen and heard. Nor the reactions of the parents, toward the girl, herself, and himself.

He put the toy hammer down and toddled over to sit at her feet. His fingers traced the swirling patterns on the clean carpet. No mud, dirt, old spills, or even dust littered this carpet.

The peace and quiet was only broken by the occasional paper shuffling at the receptionist desk. No music, talking, phones ringing,

nothing. Perfect for relaxing after an exhausting trafficy drive. Before long, the nurse returned to call her and Jendal's name.

The hall was lit almost too bright. The exam room was on the side for parents, not the side for those who were waiting to become parents. The exam table was low enough a small child could climb up safely. And it was adjustable, in height and length.

The nurse took her and Jendal's vitals, and asked the routine questions, before she texted the doctor. She sat in a chair at the computer to wait.

Dr. Newell opened the door and walked in. "Hello Shalin. How are you?"

Shalin didn't want to talk. She had printed a list of questions and concerns. She handed them to Dr. Newell.

He raised an eyebrow at her. Then he read the list aloud to the nurse. "Few words, focus, some adjustment issues, car rides preferred, easily startled, interest in sign language, doesn't let go of his toy rabbit at home."

"Jendal doesn't seem to match the chosen donor." Shalin struggled with this thought as much as the words. She was happy with Jendal as he was. He didn't fit the parameters of the genetic study, which could mean trouble for their financial future.

"Possibly. We need to run a few blood tests. I'll have him set up for vision and hearing tests. Otherwise, he seems to be doing fine." Dr. Newell marked a few notes on his phone. "His development may appear delayed. It's not always a problem. Especially when a prominent scientist is the donor. They tend to be heavy thinkers, and not talk as much."

They talked a while about various markers and other technical information before the nurse took a blood sample from them both. After Dr. Newell left, the nurse led them back out to the lobby.

"Have a safe trip home." She waved at them as they left through the auto open doors.

Shalin nodded. No words. Her mind was already focused on the dreadful trip back home. And the rush hour traffic toward the end that could make the last fifteen miles, that should take twenty minutes, take over an hour. And sometimes two.

Days later, she turned on the computer Zalena's boyfriend had brought for the women to share. It had given them all more freedom, and chances to apply for better jobs.

Shalin opened an urgent email from Emerging Lineages. They would pay for the vision and hearing test as stated. However, she and Jendal had been removed from the genetic program. Jendal's genetics did not match the donor. Or hers.

She closed her eyes and leaned back until the chair tilted almost over. How could that be?

Jendal's genetics did not match any donor on record. He could be a chimera. They planned to test him every year. A blood test to see if anything changed. He was now his own genetic study.

Shalin closed the email. She had to agree and sign some paperwork if she wanted to do this. Was it fair to Jendal?

If she didn't, all medical care and most of their financial support would be terminated. Almost immediately. Which meant both of their lives changed forever.

If she did sign them, basic medical care, some social support, basic housing, food, and preschool training remained covered. Including infant sign language. Something for them both to learn, if she could manage the extra time.

"Shalin?" Clare brought her a blanket. "What's wrong?"

"Jendal isn't his father's child. No one knows who the father is."

Clare sat down. "Wow. So much depended on that. Is everything going to be okay?"

"We need to decide. I'm unsure."

"How much time did they give you?"

"I'll know when I receive the certified letter."

Clare fluffed the blanket on the bed. "Until then, we can't worry. How did infant sign language go?"

Shalin smiled. "Not too bad. One of the instructors showed us the difference between infant level and practiced sign language. I almost passed out from the motion of his level of skill. Not sure I want Jendal trying that in front of me. Only seconds was too much." She laughed.

"We can teach Jendal to keep it simple. He will write too, I'm sure. Better communication, with reading and writing at your own speeds."

Shalin looked up at her. "That's the opposite of what Dr. Grendal at the local clinic said. He said Jendal would never learn anything, not even how to tie his shoes."

Clare laughed. "Dr. Grendal couldn't find his way out of a paper trail if he wanted to."

"Do you think I should go back to college? Online. Become a genetics nurse and help Dr. Newell?"

"There are some grants. Don't take any loans."

"No loans. I already have too many of those." Shalin smiled. "If I can't pay them back by the end of the day, at least."

"Do you have time to study?"

"Yes, if you, Irma, and Zalena are okay with helping me raise Jendal." Shalin would make time to make the future brighter for her son, and herself.

Clare peered at the sleeping toddler. "Of course. The more help we all have, the better. When will you begin?"

"I'll have to find out." The sense of purpose gave Shalin a new direction. A meaning she had long forgotten. The sleeping toddler should be enough. Everything she planned had to be to protect him from the fear of society she had known.

Chapter 11 - Galataria

Leonard - Age 3

Leonard grasped his toy saw. The wood blocks could be pretend cut and stacked to form shapes, visible only in his imagination. He built a roomy home for his favorite bird family. If only it wouldn't fall apart that evening.

The charged tablet beeped an interruption.

He glanced up at his parenta working as she did so often. Too often. She worked half of early light and half of mid light. Not that drawing and designing on the tablet made sense. Building did. There was so much to build. Galataria needed more of something. Something he hadn't quite found.

His parenta closed down the charged tablet. "Time for Silent Discovery."

He placed the block beside the others before running for his shoes. Silent Discovery. A time to be around other people. Not fun. He enjoyed making things with the two girls his own age. They were quiet and seemed more interested in books and butterflies.

What worried him was his parenta's reaction to Healer Ropen. His parenta jumped every time she spoke. He could feel the jumps, even from ten feet away. Healer Ropen seemed nice enough. Even though she used her voice far more than necessary.

The girl's parentas spoke to his parenta with no problem with signs. Few words were needed. They did fun things like making clothes, or blankets, or whatever parentas do while children play together.

His parenta shouldn't be sad. She often was at these events. Something about them bothered her. He pulled his shoes on. Tight around the toes. He pointed at his feet.

His parenta reached over and touched the ends of the shoes. She pushed down on them.

He shook his head and squeaked. That didn't feel good.

She nodded. "Rebuild soon. Trip to a museum." His parenta looked at the window as she spoke. Her shoulders stiffened. Her hands fluttered as she stared.

It was all for him. For Leonard. The burden of knowing his parenta did these things she didn't want to do for him was almost too much. His grandparenta had told him many times. With all of her constant chatter when she visited. How important this was for him, and how important to the future he was. Sometimes, he had to cover his ears and hide when she visited to make her to stop talking. Too many out loud words. Almost as if her hands couldn't work to form word signs.

He thought about his grandparenta's hands. They were less straight than his, or his parenta's hands. Perhaps they couldn't make some of the signs. Sometimes, she dropped things she picked up. She was in the scholarly generation. Relying on others to do the difficult work for her while using her mind to study and help pull together forgotten knowledge from her various apprenticeships. While this idea processed, multiple other thought strands took shape and danced around in his brain.

He jumped midstream into thinking about life as a person born without hands. Or lost them in an accident. How did they communicate? Surely, they wouldn't have to rely on only their voice. He shuddered. What a scary thought. Voices were unreliable. Fading in an out, interrupted by animal sounds, birds tweeting, electronics, walls.

Signing was easier. More natural. Signs communicated with animals. And people. Although difficult in the dark, or in a distance. Signs could be used in allergy season better than squeaky voices.

Another thought appeared as they rode in the zone cart to the museum. Healer Ropen had begun planning trips where other people were. As if being around multiple people at a time was the way people lived. Peaceful with birds, squirrels, and butterflies was life. And the cat that had joined them a few moons before.

By mid light, they were at the museum with the other two parentas and daughters. A building larger than he had seen before. Multiple people scurried up and down the walkway out front. All women. No men in sight. The only interesting hope in these outings was a dream chance of seeing a man. Someone like him.

"You will each need to give the greeters your names. And practice speaking aloud. You will need to be able to do so soon." Healer Ropen walked up to the door and opened it. At their previous meeting, she had reminded them how important it was to

be able to talk to those who only talked. To smile once a light cycle, and to be comfortable around them. Many people knew some signs, since the signers performed the more important, and delicate, skills. However, signers had to practice speaking. Trainers were usually talkies. And soon, they would be trainees. They'd have to be able to communicate with talkies as adults, and use multiple communication techniques.

In some ways it was exciting. He'd learn more signs as a trainee. Writing, reading, and tablet use. Even other spoken languages. Or, at least a few words in some. They'd practice some words from a nearby community who primarily spoke a language that almost died in the Devolution War.

Leonard glanced at Ria and Narona. They looked back at him. His hands shook a little as he realized what the healer was talking about. Soon they would spend several sun cycles each early light with multiple people their own age in trainee sessions.

The door opened automatically and a woman in a solar chair rolled out of the museum. She had a stack of books on her lap. The walkway out of the building was level with the walkways between buildings. Perhaps a small slope, enough to encourage good rain drainage. Behind her a young woman followed with a dog.

Leonard tried to smile toward the woman. It didn't work. Smiling was difficult. Actually, painful. They practiced it once a quarter moon cycle. That should be enough to be able to use it around others. That was his goal. Practice some of the odd behaviors talkies expected. A smile on the face and talking. How to do them both at once was perplexing.

He stepped forward into the strange building. It was taller than home, and covered in windows. Far too bright inside. No tall trees muted the sunshine like at home. He squinted.

His field of vision shifted away from the brightness. He no longer saw the bright interior of the museum. Instead, in front of him were chipped sidewalk shelves, crowded with people running up and down them. Rain dribbled from the sky. One group of children huddled under jackets in a staggered line along a wall. A few sobbed as they glanced up at the too tall building. It dripped black and grey. No windows in sight. Nor sunshine. No place for the woman in the wheelchair to enter, or exit, the building on the stacked shelves to the door.

"Leonard?" His parenta squatted nearby. Her eyes searched his. Something she had never done before.

He gasped and stepped back.

She nodded and held out her hand.

He placed his hand in hers. The confusion sent whirls of thoughts and feelings swirling around in his brain, as if they were a flock of birds disturbed on the water by a fish leaping in the air to catch one. His chest tightened as he listened and noticed each breath. He reached one hand to verify this was where he was. That it was safe. Or, at least not dangerous.

His parenta pressed his hand lightly and loosened enough to guide him.

Leonard glanced up at her. She stood there looking at the wall. He knew her eyes weren't seeing the exhibit. It was obvious she was deep in thought about something. Had she experienced something similar to what he had? It wasn't the first time. It was the oddest feeling. What did it mean? He didn't know the signs, or the words, to talk about it. He swallowed. They had to keep up, or Healer Ropen might leave them behind.

Another woman joined the healer and began to talk about the exhibits as they reached them.

Leonard tried to focus on the words. Too many words. Too fast. They poured out so fast he couldn't tell when one word idea ended and the next began.

His parenta closed her eyes. She touched the top of his head and signed to Healer Ropen.

The healer nodded. "Slow down please. And use signs when possible."

The woman glanced at Healer Ropen and back at the group. She breathed deep. Raised up to full height and began again. This time, she used sign language interspersed with words. Her story about the artifacts made more sense.

Sometime later, they moved into the animal hall. It was cooler and darker. Sign language would be more difficult to read here. Their guide turned away from them and rummaged in a pack. She pulled out a headlight to illuminate her hand signs.

At the beginning were the smaller animals that had died to extinction in the Devolution War. Walls of thousands of bees, butterflies, moths, bugs. On they moved to the birds. Hundreds of

bird species. Finally, they reached the larger animals. Among the larger animals were several species of deer, and other animals he did not recognize. This section was followed by a forest of no longer living flowers, food plants, and trees that formed a tunnel with a lighted hallway at its end.

They reached the lighted hallway that led to a softly lit room of new species. Species that had developed in the aftermath of the Devolution War.

Multiple species of butterfly and bees had grown from the ashes of the Devolution War. As had a few new squirrel-sized rodents. And a new type of deer. One that he knew played in the forest near home. A wall near the end was more complicated, and the guide skipped over it. Multi-colored spots she called bacteria, mold, and viruses. There were others with other complicated names that could only be spoken. Perhaps, the greeter didn't know the signs for them. The written names were too long for him to read. When he was able to read, he'd return and read all those long words, and understand the information they contained.

Narona pointed to one. A diagram that was different. Like two worms intertwined.

The greeter smiled before she explained the genetics panel. Narona was excited by it. Ria was interested.

Leonard was not. His mind shifted back and forth to the scene he had seen as they entered the museum. Somehow, the thoughts connected.

By the time they had walked the entire museum back to the front entrance, Leonard was exhausted. His eyes were tired of jumping between the signs and the exhibits, and his ear was exhausted from listening. More spoken works than he normally heard in a moon cycle. Too much.

Healer Ropen led them off into a small room with multiple tables, chairs, and food. She pulled a curtain around two tables to give them a little privacy from the other talkie groups in the eating area. She allowed them to sit and eat with few words spoken. After everyone finished, she held up her hand. "I know you are tired. I want each of you to practice speaking and listening to talking before our next visit. It will help us determine if you can be trained with the other children, or train at home through charged tablet training programs."

Leonard glanced at Ria and Narona. He was used to his time alone with his parenta. The odd one out. There were no other boys his age in their village. Only a dozen girls. A few boys younger than him had been born in the village.

He didn't want to always be home, though that was where he felt safest. He knew he needed, and wanted, to have a few close friends and be active in the village. His parenta had shown him some skills he could do from home. They weren't as interesting as building. To be a builder, he had to communicate and work with people.

He remembered dreams of a place where boys outnumbered girls. And it wasn't friendly. Or fun. Even the girls there weren't nice. How could he dream of a place he had never seen?

He said goodbye to Healer Ropen. His signs to Ria and Narona were more pronounced. "Goodbye, good luck, we can go together."

He and his parenta followed them to the zone cart pick up line outside the museum. He tucked his small hand in hers so as not to have to face the memory he had seen as they walked in.

Chapter 12 - Earth

Jendal - Age 3

Jendal clutched his mother's hand. The building ahead was bad. Scary. Lights so bright they burned through closed eyelids. Sounds of all types constantly interrupting his thoughts. Noisy electronics humming. Other children and adults screamed and yelled. Noisy boxes with all kinds of unexpected sounds and people doing strange things he couldn't identify.

His mother stopped at the door. "Breathe deeply. Doctors say this program will help you integrate into society, whatever that means." She pulled the door open.

Jendal's left hand held hers as tight as possible. He angled behind her as she walked in. His tattered yellow Bunny dangled from his right hand.

She shuffled up to sign a sheet of paper.

The receptionist yelled at whoever was on the phone and waved her hands back and forth. Even her head bounced back and forth.

His mother ignored the woman and waded through the people and broken chairs to choose a chair to sit.

All the chairs were bright painful colors. They burned his eyes. He squinted as he climbed up into the painfully bright orange chair beside his mother's bright blue one.

Some other children sat nearby. Silent. Not moving. With arms circled around their legs, and heads down.

Jendal shuddered. Before long they'd all be crying. Or trying not to cry. To hide the tears and fears.

He clutched Bunny to his chest. Jendal held it so that the tip of the ear was against his lips. He flipped the yellow bunny around and hugged it tighter. Bunny watched in front of him and guarded him. Protect him from the bad person. Heard his thoughts and tried to translate them to Madella as Bunny did for his mother. His mother almost always understood him when Bunny translated. The bad woman, Madella, never did.

The door to the inner part of the building opened. Madella stepped out. She shrieked and squealed. "Jendal. So excited to work with you today." She bounced over and grabbed his hand.

He looked away. All the motion made him dizzy.

"Look at me when I talk to you." She jerked him off the chair and half way across the aisle.

Bunny fell from his lap. He grabbed its yellow hand and held on.

His mother gasped.

Madella grabbed Bunny out of his hands. She dragged him away through the door.

She tugged him down the hall.

His feet barely touched the ground. Jendal tripped several times as he tried to keep up with her bouncing steps.

Madella dragged him into her room and slammed the door.

A table sat in the center of the room. One child chair. One adult chair. A brilliant spotlight shone on the table. Some paper and crayons were scattered on the table.

Madella laughed as she let go of him. She pulled the yellow bunny in front of her face. "Yuck. So nasty! This is too nasty for you. You aren't a girl anyway. You don't need stuffed toys. You need to speak." She opened an inner door and tossed Bunny in. Something metal clanged within.

Jendal quaked. He noticed the long dark mirror on the wall. He knew someone had to be looking at him. Someone needed to protect him. Without Bunny, he couldn't cope with Madella. A tear dripped down his cheek.

Madella pointed. "Sit. Draw a picture and tell me about your day. What have you done today?"

His lips quivered. He sat and looked at the crayons. The glared lighting was too bright to see the colors clearly. He lined them neatly up. Red, yellow, green, blue. He chose the red one and drew a few lines. There was nothing to say about his day. It was one of fear until this nightmare was over.

"Speak!"

He glanced up. What was he supposed to say? His hands shook. He drew another line and thought a few sentences. Tried to force them out of his mouth. His lips wiggled. No sounds crept out.

Madella snatched his paper and crayons away. Crayons rattled down to the floor. The paper floated behind the woman. "Look me in the eye." She grabbed his chin and pulled it to force his eyes to the same level as hers.

He closed his eyes. Tears poured down his cheeks.

She smacked his face. "Open your eyes and look me in the eye. Speak."

He shook his head. She had his face so close to hers that his chin touched her nose. He shuddered.

Madella let go of him. She leaned back in the chair. "Don't you want to learn to talk?"

He nodded.

"Don't you want to be a success in school?"

Jendal wasn't too sure about school. Not if it was like this. He nodded anyway.

"Don't you want to have a job when you grow up so your mother doesn't have to support you for the rest of her life?"

Jendal had no idea what a job was. He knew his mother worked somewhere. What did staring at someone's eyes, or talking, have to do with a job? He nodded anyway. Tried to make Madella happy. Maybe if he made her happy, she would give him his yellow Bunny back.

The time in Madella's room passed slower than honey dripping from a spoon. His mind faded in and out of whatever her demands for the day were. Sometimes, they visited the other boy and his mother at the stream in the woods. He saw a deer. A deer that licked water out of the other boy's hand.

Madella released him. She led him back to the big room with the noise boxes. Without his rabbit.

When he saw his mom, he held up his empty hand.

"Where is his rabbit?"

"He's not getting it back. Jendal is not making any progress at this point."

"Bring it back to him now."

"Nope." Madella snapped the door shut and left them standing there in the middle of all the echoing noise, blazing lights, and too bright surroundings.

His mother squeezed his hand and turned to walk away. Outside, she whispered. "You won't be back. I will get Bunny back."

The door closed. The comfort level of lighting returned. Aunt Clare had closed the door, leaving Jendal in the room he shared with his mother and Aunt Zalena. At least, he could breathe deeply.

And let his words whisper out. Enough air for them to be felt as they whispered from one side of his head to the other.

Words were such a private thing. Spoken only in private. So many people spoke all the time. Especially Madella. He shuddered at the memory of her. She wouldn't allow him to do anything he wanted to do. Whatever he wanted to do was always wrong. She had even taken his rabbit, and thrown it away, when he wouldn't talk out loud. Head talk wasn't enough to satisfy her. His only toy. The piece of life that kept him safe.

He cuddled the raggedy grey blanket in memory of Bunny.

His one comfort was the dreams. The dreams of the other boy in the trees and calm surroundings. With birds and real live bunnies for friends. And a place where he visited with two girls, much like himself.

His hands formed the signs the boy formed. Their meaning didn't match the sign language he had learned. So Jendal and his mother had formed their own. Based on the dream friend. Someone he could almost reach, though not quite understand. The unknown dream boy had a safe life.

It wasn't that he didn't like Aunt Clare. She didn't understand him. She liked to talk. Sometimes all afternoon. She never paused long enough for him to think about what she said, so most of it was noise to him. The words tripped by so fast, he couldn't catch them to think about them, and figure out how they connected. He understood her better than people out in public. They tended to talk even faster, and he couldn't catch a single full word.

His mother listened more. She'd be home soon.

The door handle turned. Madella stepped into the bedroom.

Jendal dropped the blanket and curled up into a ball.

She didn't belong here. This was his safe place. He closed his mind to speech.

She poked him with a solid yardstick. "Jendal. Be a good boy and sit up. Say hello. I know you can." She poked him sharply a few more times.

He tightened into a ball.

Madella grabbed his hands and pulled them away from his face. She lifted him up off of the bed.

He couldn't control his legs. They unfolded and swung, hitting the edge of the mattress. He would not allow her to see tears, no matter what she did to his body.

"Say hello." She shook him enough that his body swayed. "Say hello when someone walks in the door."

He looked away from her. Even Zalena did not enter the bedroom without knocking. And she slept in here during the day.

Madella plopped him on the bed and squatted down until her face was only inches from his.

He pulled back. Being that close to anyone was too scary. No one needed to be that close to his face. Not even his own mother ever did that. He clinched his hands into fists.

"Look into my eyes. We will practice eye contact since you are not ready to speak." She poked him with the yard stick until his tightly clenched eyes opened.

The door slammed open. His mother stood there. Her face radiant from emotions. "Get out of my bedroom! Out of my home!"

Madella turned and stared at his mother. "Jendal has to have five hours of treatment today. I had to come here since you did not bring him in to the clinic."

"Out! You will leave my son and me alone. Forever."

Madella stood up, crossed her arms, and stared at Jendal's mother's face. "I will not. You will take him to treatment. Or I will order you to court. I will take your son away from you."

His mother stepped past him and picked up the yard stick. She poked Madella a few times. "You will not poke and prod my son anymore. No more blazing lights shining in his eyes when he doesn't do exactly what you want, when you want it. No more theft of his toy. You will return his rabbit."

Madella jerked the yard stick out of his mother's hands. "He won't ever have that nasty girl toy again. It should have been burned. It was so gross; it'll contaminate the landfill. He can have a nicer, gender appropriate toy, perhaps a metal car, once he learns to say hello when we meet."

"Leave. You have no right to be in my home."

"I have every right. I have to prepare your son for school, and the real world. I will make him speak." Madella turned back toward Jendal. "It's my job. I have to make him fit into society."

Someone tapped his mother's shoulder.

"Leave now." Henry, Aunt Zalena's partner, stood behind his mother. A large man. A man who protected them. He had fought off a masked burglar a few months before.

Madella stared at the man. "I have the right to be here."

"You don't pay rent. I will remove you." He cracked his knuckles.

Madella grabbed her yard stick. "You haven't heard the last of me. I'll take your child and put him in the kind of home where he will receive the care and training he needs." She stalked out.

Jendal closed his eyes. She was gone. For the moment. Though what all of her words meant, he wasn't sure. His eyes opened when the apartment door slammed.

Henry sat down on the floor. His face was level with Jendal's and to the side, so he wouldn't be looking at Jendal's eyes.

His mother sat on the bed and placed her hand in his line of sight. "Can she do it?"

He nodded. "Yes. She saw the poverty here."

"Should we go?"

"I'll call Zalena. If you move out now, it'll look suspicious. And where would you go? Go out with Zalena for an hour. Buy the boy a new toy. Whatever he wants." He reached into his pocket and handed Jendal's mom some colored paper.

A new toy. It wouldn't be his Bunny. Maybe he could find a new one. What was poverty? They had everything they needed here. They had each other. His stomach growled. The growl never went away. His mother frowned if he mentioned the growl, so he didn't anymore.

Henry brought food when he visited. He was nice to Jendal. He'd speak slowly, without expecting a reply. And even though he tried to learn the signs, he messed them up a lot, so he'd talk, and Jendal signed. Not as easy to talk with as with his mother. About the same complexity as with his aunts. He had even given them a computer to use. The games on it were fun.

"Jendal. Do you want to put your shoes on?" His mother held out her hand. A tear dripped off the tip of her nose.

"Shalin, it'll be okay. We will work something out." Henry stood up. He walked over to the computer and turned it on. "I'm going to look up a few things."

"I hope so." She pushed Jendal's shoes on his feet. She didn't look at his eyes. Only toward his shoulder. Though, he sometimes felt the caress of her eyes on his face as she watched him play.

He hugged the blanket tighter. A new toy. One he would protect and hide from Madella. A cuddly toy to keep him safe, and help him reach that other boy in the woods. The boy whose life felt light. While his felt heavy. Heavy from what emotion he couldn't name no matter how much he tried. Maybe it didn't have a name.

Chapter 13 - Galataria

Leonard - Age 7

Leonard woke before early light. The wind rustled the leaves against the windows. Birds sang their dawn songs. A coywolf howled in the distance. A distance not brought closer by the demands of the village beyond the trees.

As he listened, he remembered his dream. Another place, another time. Dark, parched ground, with dried bits of grass sticking out. No animal sounds. No birds, butterflies, bees, or even trees. Only noise. Loud solar carts that weren't solar. Clouds billowed out behind them as they raced, or paused and waited, making even louder noises, in uncountable numbers among buildings whose only access was multiple shelves. Sometimes, the shelves went all the way to the tops of the buildings.

Nothing that felt like home. There, his mind was alone, deeply alone, in pain, and scared. The hands of the body that mind looked out of were deeply scarred. Cold feet uncovered. And an empty stomach. Always empty whenever he visited the dream world.

Ria listened to his dreams and built stories about their meaning. She liked history. And researched all the pieces that didn't fit in their world from his dreams. She shook her head at the oddness of it. It was a place out of time. It didn't belong.

Narona said it was the ancient male war genes awakening. They'd remain for many generations. He'd have to forget them.

It didn't fit. Even his own parenta shared dreams of this other time, other place. They all agreed to keep it secret. If the Matrilineal Council found out about their shared dreams, he'd have to move to one of the male villages. And they'd believe the experiment had failed.

That would break his parenta's heart. Even though she had a daughter three sun cycles younger than Leonard, and planned for another son. His parenta walked into his bedroom. She signed a wake up greeting.

He nodded back.

Now, his parenta spent most of her words on his sister. Arilla liked to talk and enjoyed visiting the village every light cycle if she

was allowed. At age four, she had a future all mapped out. She wanted to be Healer Ropen's trainee and replacement, and eventually train under Doctor Janel as one of two needed replacements for the growing village.

He accomplished his wake up routine. Each step the same as the light cycle before, and all the ones he foresaw coming. It was relaxing to rely on muscle memory and allow his brain to waken the same way every light cycle.

The long, and not always identical, part of the routine was the walk to join the other villagers his age. Usually, it was fine. Arilla followed behind, and chatted with all her friends in the first sun cycle group. There were two boys and four girls in her trainee age group.

Most girls in his group ignored him because he didn't talk out loud. The younger boys talked more than he did, though not as much as girls. One sun cycle left of this walk before he began an unchosen apprenticeship. A chosen apprenticeship represented peace. A planned future. No more listening to Arilla chatting incessantly. Nor her talkie friends.

When he reached the building where they studied, he waited for Ria and Narona to join him. To discuss this new dream. While the trainers talked and used a mix of signs and words, he and his friends used primarily signs to communicate, with each other, their parentas, and their trainers. Written words were almost as useful. Signs were a little quicker, though sometimes less precise. The trainers often missed the nuances of half the signs.

The trainers focused first on the youngest group for training. It was a good way to review and connect the lessons they worked on. Plenty of time to sign the story.

Leonard glanced at Arilla.

Her reciting of an early history lesson lasted until the trainer cut the story off. She knew the story, and tended to add all kinds of details that weren't in the reading material.

The three friends ignored the math they were supposed to be focusing on for the dream story. Their hands flew through the signs so fast, the verbal trainers couldn't keep up. So they couldn't remind them of the task they should be doing, since they had no idea what they were signing.

"Who are you dream seeing and why?" Ria signed.

"I don't know. I wish I did."

"Is it the same person and places as before?"

Leonard considered the question. Each time, the place appeared different. Almost the same. Dirty, dingy, moldy, wet. Unhappy, fear, sadness, anger, hurt, so many emotions, some without names or recognition. Too many emotions. The person, the hands, appeared the same. The woman with the person was the same in many places. Except when the eyes he was seeing through were with others his own age. Or when the woman who attacked him was there. She was a danger to the person whose eyes he looked through. "Likely."

Narona peered at her tablet. "Describe the woman and person whose eyes you see through."

"They look like people. I can't describe them."

"Check their hands next time you dream about them."

The trainers moved up a row, to the next youngest. The age six group were in a circle close by. The trainers were close enough to realize the signs Leonard, Ria, and Narona were using were not related to math.

Leonard turned his attention to the math. Simple equations. Vocal people seemed to have more difficulty with them. He simply closed his eyes, thought about the request, and the solution appeared. He couldn't explain how he knew the answers to the trainers. It was never the same process as the trainers explained to the trainees.

"Use your written words to describe the process." The trainer stood next to him, ready to see how he reached his conclusion.

"No words for how, I just know," Leonard signed.

The trainer touched the paper. This time she spoke rather than using signs. "You have the right answer. How will you teach someone how to do this, if you can't name the steps you used to reach the answer?"

"I don't want to be a trainer." He signed.

"As you progress through your apprenticeships, you have to be ready to train others. Can you explain your steps in other subjects?"

Leonard nodded. Of course. Math simply happened. It answered itself without any work or thought. For other subjects he could show a step by step process.

The trainer returned to signs. "Review the scientific method. See if remembering it helps you explain math." He then turned to Narona.

By mid light, Leonard was more than ready to leave the constant chatter at the training center. Natural outdoor sounds signified home, with few spoken words.

Arilla raced up to him and handed him her books before going off with friends for lunch, and whatever else they planned to do before dinner.

Ria caught up with him. "Wait. Narona and I have something to tell you." Her signs were somewhat shaky, so it was important.

They sat together on a fallen tree trunk at the bend in the trail leading to their separate homes.

Ria glanced back as a few villagers passed them before she signed what was so important. "Our parentas have decided to move together to a new village next sun cycle. They want us to go to a larger village. And asked if you wanted to go."

"Why?" Leaving the only village he knew would be devastating. It was home. Safe. Secure. He knew most people by face, if not by name.

Narona glanced at each of them before signing. "I can't apprentice here. Healer Ropen and Doctor Janel don't take apprentices in genetics. I have to go to where I can apprentice. So we'll all live together and our parentas will help each other with the younger girls."

Leonard leaned back against the tree trunk. That required a lot of thought. He had his routines set here. They were easy and soothing. A quiet home. Except for his sister who was a talkie. She tended to spend more time with her talkie friends than at home with him and their parenta.

Both of his friends knew he hadn't chosen an apprenticeship in the village to prepare for. None available had felt right. Nor any from nearby villages. Though they were all outside of walking distance for someone his age.

"Where will you go?" He looked at both of them to see the signed answer.

"Yellowwood. It is the closest genetic training center." Narona glanced down to let him know it wasn't her first choice.

"Where would you like to go?" He leaned back to watch her more closely.

"Maryiana, if it wasn't so far from home. It's too far to move with all the family. We can't obtain a moving dispensation for that distance."

Leonard leaned back. A moving dispensation was generally granted a few times in a lifetime. If that. The other option was to move with little more than you could carry. It could be done. Especially for apprenticeships. It meant leaving everyone they knew behind. "You can go there after you train."

She glanced at him, and then up at the tree above them. "I intend to. I'll take you. I think our answers are there."

Ria nudged in to the conversation. "We will find out where the dreams are coming from. There are plenty of tale tellers in Yellowwood."

The conversation was over. A plan made. Except his part. What would he apprentice for in Yellowwood? Research gave him something to look forward to during the late light hours. And possibly for several light cycles.

Leonard's parenta waited for him. She smiled and held the door open.

He walked in. They ate a relaxing lunch. He signed Ria and Narona's news about Yellowwood.

His parenta closed her eyes. "I'll miss you."

He nodded. His parenta had provided a good home to grow up in. It was time to stretch out to apprentice. Find a challenge, and complete something valuable to Galataria. "I have to find something."

"Your skill choice was the hammer."

"There are no builders here." He sipped water. "No need for any, as no new homes will be built for a few more sun cycles."

"Yes. However, if you train elsewhere, you can always visit when one needs to be built." She picked up her plate to carry it to the sink.

"May I use the charged tablet?"

"Yes. I'll be out in the garden after lunch. Let me know if you need anything."

"Thanks. I should be fine." Leonard finished eating. His mind searched for answers. Building was a good skill. Not exactly what he wanted to do. It was close. A good place to begin.

Chapter 14 - Earth

Jendal - Age 7

The tattered blue blanket tugged at the stuffed owl. Jendal pulled the blanket tighter against his chest. The snowy owl shifted closer to him.

Without a sound, he knew his mother had gotten up for the day. No words were needed. This was his alone time. Not long each morning to contemplate the night before. The conversations between his mother and aunts.

Last night a rude lady had been to his home again. She had spoken to him at school earlier in the day. She ignored his signed answers by grabbing his hands and forcing them down. Like Madella, she had tilted his chin up to force his eyes to her eye level. She had demanded his mother force him to return to Madella and her training. Or they would take him away from this home. The only home he knew.

He had hidden in the bedroom after that, with Owly clutched tightly against his chest. The woman's voice moved closer. When the door handle started to turn, he shoved the owl under the bed amidst his shoes. No time to hide. He shivered.

Henry's voice boomed at the woman not to open the door without knocking.

She had waited longer than normal to reply. "Why would I knock for a child? I have to be sure he is safe." She then opened the door and stared at him. Huddled on the floor. His comfort was inches away, and hopefully out of the woman's sight.

"Don't you want to play with your friend Madella? She wants to help you. Teach you to talk."

He shook his head and made the sign for no. Both signs.

The woman smacked his hand. "Use your words, not your fingers."

He closed his eyes. There were no words to waste on this woman.

Henry grabbed the woman's arm. "Out."

She glared at him. "I can have you arrested for assault."

"I didn't hurt you near as much as you hurt Jendal by smacking him. Nor near as much pain as you deserve. Out. And don't return. Or I will have you arrested for trespassing." Henry pointed toward the front door.

The woman jerked her hand away from Henry. "You don't live here. I have the roster for who lives here."

He stepped closer to her. "I have been requested to be here, and be a guardian for Jendal."

"I'll see about that." She made a rude noise and stalked out the door.

Tears slipped down Jendal's cheeks as his memory reached that point. All of his aunts and Henry tried to protect him and his mother. Somehow, he was always the cause of the problems. If he could go somewhere quiet to live without other people, they'd be free from these women who wanted to hurt him.

Every morning, he spent precious peaceful moments trying to figure out how to change himself. How to fix the problems, so the bad people would leave them alone. There had to be a way he could feel comfortable talking. He didn't. It was painful and confusing. Speaking out loud interrupted his whole mind, and everything he focused on. Those who insisted on talking were confusing in their requests and responses. As if they communicated backwards. Or at least out of order. It took every thought process he had to comprehend them.

At school, it wasn't much different. The previous year, he had been placed in a too loud, too bright, too active room. That teacher didn't even know he was there. This year, he was in a quieter room, with fewer children. Children who saw the world more like he did. The teachers didn't though. They demanded constant visual and listening attention to them, rather than natural communication.

Some mornings, his mind drifted to the other boy. The one who lived in the woods. This unknown friend had fun adventures. Going places. Doing things. Visiting with lots of children and adults who taught them things. They had high expectations for him.

While, he wasn't allowed anywhere on his own. Jendal had two adults with him, because they were so afraid someone would snatch him away from his mother. Other than the preschool, and school now, he was never without at least one aunt by his side. And Henry was often there too. Especially if they went to a park for him

to play. Happily, they only did that when there were few other people there. Sometimes, they'd arrive at the park, and keep on walking, or driving, because there were people there already.

There had to be something he could do to make them all safe.

A soft knock sounded at the door. His mother did so every morning to remind him it was time to be up.

His morning routine rarely changed. He woke up, tumbled out of bed, and straightened the covers. Dressed in painful clothes. Ate cereal for breakfast. His mother and Aunt Clare dropped him off at school.

Today began no different. Although everything felt different. His mother and aunt kept glancing at each other. As if they were keeping a secret. Something they never did.

Secrets hurt. Like Madella. She liked secrets. Always telling him not to tell what she did when she forced him to do things for a moment's silent time. Or slapping his hands if he used signs instead of spoken words. Even though he hadn't seen her for a few years, those bad women kept coming and trying to force him to go back. Against his mother's wishes. He'd never forget Madella.

His hands clenched at the memory of her. His thoughts hurt. Thinking was too difficult when her memory took over.

"You'll need a coat today." His mother spoke softly. Sometimes so soft he could barely hear her over the other people living in the building. Even with walls, their noise carried right through, and to his ears.

"Bring Owly." Aunt Clare signed. She slipped on a light weight jacket before her heavier one.

Jendal opened his eyes wider. He never took Owly anywhere outside their apartment. It was a secret. A good, safe secret. His hands shook.

His mother lifted her hands. Her signs meant to relax. More in the car.

He hurriedly did what his mother told him to finish getting ready to go. He knew he wasn't going to school today. Which was fine. That place was loud and noisy. Even the quieter room was too loud through the walls from other children. His hands shook as he zipped on his jacket. He slipped Owly inside the jacket to keep her warm, and safe.

Jendal climbed into his high seat in the car. His head was too close to the roof, and sometimes, it hurt his neck the way he had to turn to keep it from scraping the roof when the car turned a corner. His knees had pressed holes into the back of the driver's seat. Legally, he was considered too light weight to not ride in a child car seat. Even though the booster seat meant he was too tall to sit in it without banging his head on the roof and windows.

As his mother slipped into the driver's seat, he signed a question to her.

"Wait." His mother drove past the school and kept driving.

Before long, they passed out of the area he recognized. They stopped in an empty parking lot.

His mother got out of the car and helped him out. They hurried away from the car and toward the line of closed stores. She looked at him and signed. "We are concerned the apartment might be watched. They know things they shouldn't."

"We will all be staying with Henry for a while." Aunt Clare glanced back at him. "Not sure the car is safe either."

"That's okay. It needs replacing. Henry and Zalena will pick it up and change it out." His mother paused before they rounded the side of the building. "Safe."

Henry's? He hadn't been there. Aunt Zalena had been there a few times. Was it like the only home he knew? All crumbled and falling apart. Maybe it had a few of the colors he saw at school. Or a window that birds could fly by. Hopefully, fewer people lived there, and they wouldn't hear thumps and bumps from the floor above.

On the other side of the building, out of sight of the car, Henry waited in his blue pickup truck.

Safety. Maybe. The truck was nice and large enough for four of them. He climbed in the door Henry held open for him.

A while later, Henry parked the vehicle in front of another large house. Henry walked up and unlocked the main door.

Jendal held back. Something was different. This house did not have a parking lot. He peeked in the door. No hallway lined with other doors. No rickety staircase leading to the unknown depths of a second musty floor.

His mother reached for his hand. "This is a good home. One with four bedrooms."

He followed her in.

She led him to a small room with two covered beds. "You will sleep on your own bed tonight. I know it'll be strange." She signed with her empty hand.

"What? Where will Aunt Zalena live?" He clutched his mother's hand tighter.

"She will live with Uncle Henry. There is a room for Aunt Irma and a room for Aunt Clare. Which bed would you prefer?"

A small bed stood next to the inner wall. A pretty yellow blanket covered it. A small nightstand, all whole, no broken bits, leaned between it and another small bed next to the window. This one had a soft grey blanket on it. If he chose that one, anyone who tried to break in, had to go past him to reach his mother. He walked over to that bed and climbed up on it to look out the window. It was a small window. With beige curtains that let sunlight in.

"I'll choose this one." Jendal sat down on the bed. It was soft. Not like the over firm bed he was used to. He touched the pillow. A soft pillow only for him.

His mother sat on the small bed across from his. "Someday, you will have a room all to yourself."

Jendal scrunched his eyes shut. A room to himself? How could that ever be?

Henry stopped by the open door. "Going to pick up Zalena and Irma. We will pack and grab clothes. Need anything else?"

"No. Don't take too much. Most needs replacing anyway."

"We won't." Henry walked on through the house.

Jendal unzipped his jacket and pulled Owly out. A place to sleep undisturbed.

"Do you want to explore the rest of the house and the yard?" His mother held out her hand, without the expectation that he would take it.

Jendal held her hand. He held Owly close while they went off to explore the house like none he had ever seen.

He and his mother explored all four large bedrooms. One bedroom almost as large as the apartment they had lived in. Uncle Henry and Aunt Zalena would share that one. Two full sized bathrooms, with good lighting. No broken fixtures, and large enough to turn around in. The room they had entered when they first walked in turned out to be large, with lots of soft furniture. No

more sitting on the floor, or perching on Aunt Clare and Aunt Irma's bed.

Then, they entered another room that answered his last question. A spacious kitchen. No bed or table with a broken leg blocking cabinets. Pans hung over a large stove. There was a nice table with six chairs on wheels in a smaller room off to the side.

Jendal smiled.

His mother opened another door. They walked outside into a wooden fenced yard. One with a few trees and benches to rest on. A place to relax, or play. A calm park for him and his family.

He ran to a tree and sat down on the ground under its shadow. There was a small pile of rocks. He picked them up and began to stack them.

His mother smiled before she went back into the house, leaving an inner door open. Her face peeked out a window at him.

He smiled.

Chapter 15 - Galataria

Leonard - Age 10

The garden stone wall glistened. A stone wall that represented the culmination of Leonard's first trade apprenticeship. Something that shouldn't have been able to have been done in so short a time. At least according to his trainers. They were talkies though. It took them longer to complete tasks that required thought, not words.

Leonard smiled. The wall shone of freshly cleaned stone. Stone that had been properly trimmed to fit and needed no mortar to hold it in place. He knew the processes as well as he knew his own wake up cycle. In one sun cycle, stones turned grey. After a second sun cycle, rain melted the sandstone. Melt wasn't quite the correct term. It worked. The grains slowly separated and slid down the wall creating small colorful rivers for the tree mosses to grow in. In a few sun cycles, the wall would appear to have grown in the forest. A path for squirrels, mice, and other small animals. On the village side, he had added several hiding places for bird nests to be secure from larger hungry animals. This garden wall helped deter wild wolves from entering the Yellowwood village gardens.

A worthy achievement. One his parenta and grandparenta would be proud of. Many villagers expected him to stay, and be the wall's caretaker for life since he was one of three men in Yellowwood.

The peaceful site flickered. His comprehension drifted to another consciousness.

The hands in front of him shook. Noise echoed in a room with more people, both male and female than was safe to be in so small a space. A space not large enough for four people, held dozens of moving people. They bounced in chairs, screamed, yelled, and many ran around the room, jumping across vivid furniture and garish items scattered on the floor. One person, a female about his own age chased another female around the cluttered perimeter of the room with a metal fork.

Leonard closed his eyes. Emotions surged through the body of the person his mind had entered. The unnamable, unrecognizable emotions cascaded like a wave, washing forward and back. A little

more forward and back each time. The legs began to twitch. Scarred hands pounded the table.

A swish alerted him to open his eyes.

An adult stood in front of the person his mind was in. She smacked him in the face with her hand. Her words were thick, unrecognizable. She backed away and grabbed the female running in front of the one with the fork. She shook the female and slammed her back into the fork of the female chasing her.

The younger female screamed. She collapsed on the floor with the fork sticking out of her back.

The woman glared at the young female and raised her foot to kick her.

Leonard kicked the body's leg forward.

The adult female tripped and fell across an empty table. She stood up and glared at the person whom Leonard hadn't figured out who it was. "Jendal!"

The eyes closed.

Leonard shook from head to toe. His breathing was labored and erratic.

He had a name. A name of the person he looked through the eyes of. Whether male or female, he didn't know. He gulped. An answer to the question would be obvious, if he looked. Although every time he was there, it was a traumatic experience. Never restful and peaceful. Had more harm happened to this Jendal because he made him kick his leg into the adult, who was probably in her third apprenticeship?

A shadow crossed the stone wall. The flawless wall that many talkies had said couldn't be so perfect. Shadows highlighted the tiny imperfections that glistened with dew.

Ria and Narona walked into the clearing.

Ria sat on the ground beside him. She placed her hands on the ground close to his knees.

He shuddered as the memory of Jendal's world returned.

"What?" Narona sat beside him and leaned closer than normal.

He lifted his right hand to use the special sign they used. "Another dream." His hand fluttered downward to rest on his knee. It reminded him of the too thin leg that wasn't his as it kicked the woman. That was an act he'd never consider in his waking moments. Never needed to. Protecting Jendal, and the unknown

female, was more important. What would the Matrilineal Council do if they found out an adult woman acted that way? There wouldn't have been time to ask. Only to act to protect the others his age.

The seared memories remained and haunted him. Memories he wanted to forget, and couldn't.

Narona leaned back against the stone wall. She raised her left hand to sign. "Glad your apprenticeship is completed. We can go to Maryiana as soon as the arrangements are made."

Leonard nodded. It was so important. However, he didn't want to leave Ria behind. Or his parenta and siblings. They were half a light cycle away. He had seen them a few times since he had moved to Yellowwood. "Ria?"

"I'm staying for a while. Not long. Until the youngest sister is walking. Maybe a moon cycle." Ria touched his knee. A gesture of peace and comfort.

"I need to see my parenta before we go." Leonard tossed a nut toward the squirrel chattering on the wall.

The squirrel chattered at him and ran to grab the nut.

The long trip to Maryiana took almost a moon cycle. The quickest and safest route was solar cart to their birth village of Cralin, then a solar ship the rest of the way.

"Can you plan the trip to your parenta's house?"

"I will. A solar cart should be going that way soon for deliveries. Your parenta can schedule a solar ship to Maryiana."

A few light cycles later, Leonard and Narona waited for the solar delivery cart. In some ways, it was similar to a regular solar cart. There was room for four people. The cart was for carrying packages that weighed more than a horse cart could carry, and for long distance packages to travel. If there were no passengers, the seats were also filled with packages.

They carried all of their clothes and necessities in a small pack that fit between their feet. They were even granted one small box to travel with them, a parting gift from Narona and Ria's parentas to his own parenta.

Another passenger they didn't know sat up front with the runner. She was going to Cralin to apprenticeship with the trainers there. The two women up front carried on talking banter all of early light, and far into mid light.

Leonard and Narona didn't try to speak. There was too much talking between the runner and other passenger, and too many sights to see to even bother with signing.

When they reached Cralin, the runner asked where they lived, so she could deliver them to his parenta's door.

Leonard pulled out the extra small box they had travelled with. It was packed with memories of their apprenticeships for all three of them. Something to keep and cherish after they had moved on, since none of them planned to return here, and his parenta had no interest in going other places. She had been here since her first apprenticeship ended. Maybe earlier.

The thought tugged at him. He didn't want to go either. This was the place he had learned to walk, talk, sign, sing, and chosen his future. Would he ever return? He shook his head. The dreams demanded he wouldn't.

His parenta stepped out of the door. She brushed a stray lock of hair off of her ear. She smiled before she signed a welcome home.

He smiled back. His hands were too full to sign. Leonard's voice didn't want to work at the moment. Having full hands was a good reason to talk instead of sign. If the words needed to be said sooner rather than later.

Once inside, he carried his pack to his own room. The room with the sunbeam, dust, and new baby brother. Brother. A word few people ever used. Especially young men. They never met, or knew, their siblings. He opened the door to see a smaller version of himself sitting on the floor, watching the sun dance through the glass wind chime. It bounced the colors all over the walls, ceiling and floor.

The boy, Gilbertan, looked up and nodded. Not even a wave or a word.

Leonard smiled. There was no need for words. They had introduced themselves over the charged tablets. The two sun cycle old boy knew who Leonard was. His brother was like him. And their parenta. Quiet. A signer.

In the next room, Arilla chattered and sang. As excited as possible to have Narona visit and stay with her. She had someone to share a room with for three light cycles.

Leonard didn't even have to go in there to know that Narona wanted to hold her ears and hide. She wouldn't complain. She and

Ria had two talkie sisters. They knew what to expect. At least the talkie ones had their own room, and the signing sisters had a peaceful room. On the opposite side of their parenta's rooms. His room had been closer to the front, away from everyone else. It would be turned into a workroom for the women.

After a rather chatty dinner, Arilla left to visit some friends. Her words and updates echoed in his head. So much had changed in the village. Little had stayed the same. Except his parenta.

She sat down outside to enjoy the trees and birds singing overhead. The peaceful silence lazed into a dreamlike state after the chattery light cycle.

Soon, his parenta, Narona, and Leonard signed more news from Yellowwood.

She was proud of him and his success. Success was expected. It wasn't always achieved in the expected time.

"Arilla still wants to apprentice with Healer Ropen." His parenta smiled as she signed. "It'll do her good. All that talking during training. When she comes home, she may be ready to listen to life."

She handed a small stick to Narona to pass to Gilbertan. "It was so easy to teach you everything Leonard. All I ever had to do was give you the tools and information, and you absorbed it. Not at all like talkie Arilla. Poor girl, so similar to my parenta, never could focus on anything, not even with her constant chatter."

"Do talkie families always talk?" This thought had crossed his mind multiple times because of the dreams. Signing was generally preferred. Less interruption of life.

"In the dream world they do. It's a scary place. Do you still visit it?"

He nodded. "I don't like it."

"We hope to find out why he has the dreams." Narona spoke instead of signing as she stacked a small pile of leaves for Gilbertan. "And you also. I can't find any records of other people having them."

"Would you admit it?" His parenta's hands moved with more emotion than usual. Her emotions were intense. More intense than any she had shown before.

Narona shook her head before signing. "No. The dreams aren't in post-war tales, signed, or spoken, either."

Leonard leaned back against a tree. No tales spoke of these strange dreams. Except the tales of times before the wars. When men numbered the same as women. Or greater. Something he didn't want to think about. History, while not forgotten, must not be repeated. The survival of humans, and the world, depended on not repeating the mistakes and wars of the past.

Gilbertan laughed.

A bunny had hopped up to him and nosed his knee.

Leonard held out his hand to the bunny. It did look similar to the one he knew when he was his brother's age.

The bunny hopped over to him.

Leonard's heart swelled with hope. Hope they could find a solution as to why he had the disturbing dreams. And bring true peace and harmony back to him.

Chapter 16 - Earth

Jendal - Age 10

Jendal rubbed his leg. It still hurt from kicking out to stop the teacher the day before. He had no memory of doing it. It was as if his mind had been taken over by someone else.

He did want to protect Opal from mischievous Penny.

Penny was inevitably mean. She reveled in hurting people. She was loud enough to be heard three halls away. Her glittering clothes burned his eyes. Her constant motion didn't help. Colors blurred into a kaleidoscope of motion and sound. Somehow, she managed to bounce around a room with forty desks, and almost as many children without hurting herself. Her cartwheels and jumps often landed her on desks, and unfortunate kids who were paying attention to their work, and not to Penny.

Opal was sweet and nice. Quiet like himself, when she wasn't being chased and beaten up by Penny. Or bothered by the boys outside their class. She was the smart one in their classroom. The person everyone, except Penny, asked for help with their classwork.

Jendal sighed.

The teacher didn't understand. Ms. Burntthorn never could. She didn't believe a word any of them said. He laughed. They could read a paragraph out of the required textbook, and she'd call them a liar. Whatever the books said, simply wasn't that way. She'd dispute anyone, even adults, no matter the validity of the source, if their views didn't match hers.

She spent as much time marching students to the office as she did pretending to teach.

Ms. Burntthorn believed in old fashioned discipline. To her, any infraction of the rules, regardless of reason, legitimate, or not, required instant punishment. She didn't believe in finding out if there was a root cause to the problem, sometimes as simple as a dropped paper, or not.

Penny, for unknown reasons, escaped her wrath. Penny had never been marched to the office. Had never even been in trouble. Even when she threw paper airplanes at the teacher's face.

Although corporal punishment wasn't technically allowed, she had managed to be sure she had her heavy ruler handy at all times. And it if missed the edge of a desk and caught a student's fingers, they obviously weren't paying attention and deserved the bruises.

A large, leather rolled up horsewhip curled in a large locked wall cabinet. Ms. Burntthorn had tacked the dozen leather tails separately, so that the students could see each of them. When they misbehaved too much, she'd force the student to stand in front of the whip and stare at it until their knees turned to jelly.

Sometimes three or four of them were forced to stand and stare at the whip. In some ways that was better. They used their hands to balance, and were less likely to fall over. Opal had fallen one day when she was the first to be punished. The fall, and hit on the head, had earned her time in the "silent" room.

His legs felt like jelly after the forced staring at the whip for three hours the previous day. Not only did she force him to look at the whip, she pulled out a board from under her desk, almost as long as a window sill, full of holes. Then she asked how that would feel across his backside.

Since he didn't, and couldn't, reply, she had marched him to the office, where they put him in the worst "silent" room. The nosiest room in the building. There were four. Each successively more aggravating than the last. All were locked from the outside. No windows. No door handle inside. No other doors. Too bright lights glared at him from screened alcoves in each corner. A screen covered ceiling fan blew cold air directly down on him as it whistled and screamed at him. There was nowhere to hide from the constant glare, gusting air, and pounding noise. In winter, a heavy blanket was placed on the cold concrete floor. The rest of the time, there was nothing to do except stare at the door until it opened.

Jendal had placed his knees against the door, with his back against the wall behind him. He was almost too big to sit in the silent room. The authorities would have to find a new way to punish him. This room was the worst they could do. Hurt every single sense he had with light, noise, and odor.

The smell was from the accidents that occurred because the students were not allowed out of the silent room for lunch, vomiting, bathroom breaks, or anything else. Sometimes, they jerked one student out and shoved another in without looking. More than once

he had sat in an ice-cold pee puddle. Or seen wall covered artwork created from blood and poop. Locked in students didn't even leave if a fire drill happened. If there were a real fire, or emergency, he shuddered to think what would happen. No one would know where he was.

It was too cold and too painful. With his eyes closed, he focused on the dream world. He rubbed his arms and tried to shut his ears. It didn't work. He reached deep into his pockets for his ear plugs. They hid the noise a little.

The dream boy. Whom he pictured at sea, with a gentle breeze wafting him somewhere he could be safe and secure. His friends were with him. Never far away. Jendal imagined he was beside his friend on the journey, listening to conversations he couldn't quite understand, about people he didn't know. Mothers and sisters danced in and out of the conversation. Not a single boy.

He leaned another direction to adjust the pressure on his knees. In fact, he couldn't ever remember seeing a boy or man in the dream world. Or hear one being spoken of. A world with only one boy, and no men? Seemed too good to believe. He chuckled softly. In Jendal's world, it seemed to be equal parts of blame to go around.

When Jendal's mother had picked him up after work, she had not spoken. Her hand's shook on the car steering wheel. Disappointment was certain.

Had he become the monster Dr. Grendal had said he would? Unable to care about others? Lashing out at everything and anyone? Unable to control his limbs?

He shook his head. It was as if he had had no control. As if someone else made him do it. He laughed. No one ever believed that. Or listen if he said it. They'd send him to a mental hospital.

This morning he didn't want to go to school. Or anywhere. It felt as if he had let his mother, Uncle Henry, Aunt Zalena, Aunt Irma, and Aunt Clare down. The shame was a healthy shame. To hurt another was a very bad thing. And reflected on his family's raising of him. Not like the shame Ms. Burntthorn insisted the students feel shame about every tiny mistake. She tried to make everything a shame. Unlike his family, who believed shame should be rare, and reserved for truly devastating behavior.

Aunt Zalena's new baby girl cried. The sound carried down the hall. Tamela was a good baby, most of the time. She tried to be.

He covered his ears.

Jendal knew it wasn't right. The way people talked down to him, as if he knew nothing. Spoken words were rare for him. There was no need, as people didn't hear his words anyway. They heard what they wanted to hear. Or expected to hear.

At school he covered a city library book with a garish comics cover. The one he had used for the last year. He sat in the corner, with his back against the wall, and read about supervolcanoes while the other students played, laughed, and even yelled for no known reason.

Silence was a dream. The silent place. The forest glade he often dreamed of. This time, there was a rock wall covered with growing moss. A rabbit scampered near it. Two girls had shared food with each other and though words were softly spoken, more was said with signs. Signs Jendal couldn't quite understand. They were familiar, although different.

He slipped out from under the covers. He tucked in the bedding and placed Owly on top by the pillow. His favorite outfit, grey comfort sweats resided in their place of honor on the nightstand. Not appropriate for school. He sighed.

School clothes. Scratchy. Itchy. No soap ever took the pain of the clothes away. His mother had sewed bits of soft flannel inside under the shoulders to make the shirts a little less painful. He left the shirt untucked until after breakfast. Both for the comfort of movement, and the waist expansion when he ate. In fact, it wasn't uncommon to loosen the school required belt by two inches anytime he ate.

That was the strange part. They were required to wear a belt. And it had to be loosened to eat or drink anything. Loosening it in public was considered rude. Students weren't allowed to go to the restrooms to loosen it enough to eat before eating, and even if they did, their pants were then too loose, and fell off on the way to the tables. It didn't make sense. There was no understanding of how the body worked, and no acceptance of taking care of the body.

His mother had requested they allow him to wear elastic banded pants. The school refused to allow it. So, she had given his school pants to Irma, who had sewed elastic into the waist band, and

added a few extra loops, so his belt fit comfortably, whether eating or not.

So far, the teachers, even Ms. Burntthorn, hadn't noticed. He'd be expelled if they did notice.

No words were spoken as they ate breakfast. None were needed. It was a comfortable silence. Soft sunlight filtered in through the curtains. A window of a family home. So unlike anything he had known in his early years.

He remembered those years. A dark and dingy apartment. Five to six people huddled into one small place, sharing two small rooms and a bathroom not large enough to turn around in. Now they were seven, and shared a home with four bedrooms, a living room, a kitchen, and a yard. A yard with trees, flowers, a seating area, and a barbecue grill. More than he knew one family could have.

With more than one vehicle, the adults could all work better shifts. His mother had her own car now. Even Aunt Irma and Aunt Clare had their own vehicles. They shared when possible. It made shopping and errands more easily taken care of, when they were split among multiple people with multiple vehicles.

His mom tapped the table in front of him before signing. "School today. Final exams."

Jendal put his spoon down to sign. "How much longer?" For him, school was a nightmare. It didn't seem quite as bad for his mother. She went to a building across town for exams and classes one night a week. She studied at night on the computer.

"Two years. Work makes it take longer." She left the kitchen to go back to their room.

An hour later, his mother dropped him off at the school. She had parked in the back, where parents weren't supposed to. It was closer to his classroom. "Have a safe day."

He grimaced. It was never safe in school. Only his physical size kept him from being attacked by students. Most of the teachers ignored him. Teachers, like Ms. Burntthorn, paid no attention to who caused trouble. Many a teacher had hit a student, often the one being beaten up by other students, "To keep them from hurting someone else."

"Good luck on finals." He didn't understand why his mother choose to go to school. At least this school had not allowed Madella

to visit him. Ms. Burntthorn was almost as bad. If not worse in some ways.

He trudged through the sixth-grade section to reach the classroom shared by fourth through eighth grade special needs students. The older students ignored him. He was taller than most of them. The girls stayed out of his way, and wouldn't look at him.

At the door to the room he existed in for seven hours every day, he paused. Mirrors and cameras along the ceiling showed that he did this every day. As if looking for something, or maybe an escape. Jendal then closed his mind to the world around him. He tried to reach the happy place. The place with trees, deer, and other wild animals. He squared his shoulders and stepped into the room.

Ms. Burntthorn grabbed his arm. "You are being moved to another school next week. Sit and be quiet today. Don't worry about paying attention. You won't be learning the same things there." A firm shove pushed him toward the back of the room.

Jendal sat at the back of the room. Did his mother know? She hadn't said anything. Who would protect Opal if he wasn't there?

He pulled out the book on supervolcanoes and delved deep inside it. The noise of the classroom disappeared as he wandered across the terrain of an ancient, presumably extinct, volcano. All the life there, trees, birds, mammals, and more, would be destroyed if it ever rumbled awake.

Chapter 17 - Galataria

Leonard - Age 12

No walls for Leonard's next project. The gardens in Maryiana were protected from rabbits, and would remain so for hundreds of sun cycles. Unless new homes were built. With only a few new homes allowed per sun cycle, that was unlikely. It wasn't a village people wanted to move to. At least historically.

His next apprenticeship project was a bridge. A bridge made of recycled pieces from a former city a light cycle away. A place he hadn't been. Only women hunters went there. Many of the materials needed for the bridge hadn't survived either the Devolution War, or the generations after. Metal could be reformed. Some was needed. The village council wanted to connect Maryiana across the river to a smaller village, Genetica, where the largest population of men lived. A place where they contributed to the future of humans on Galataria.

It wasn't a project Leonard wanted. The village leaders hadn't asked him if it was a good idea. He wasn't sure if it was or not. It scared him somehow. The history. The men. The tales of war. They were needed. Men worked on projects of their own, and stayed by themselves. They participated in the genetics clinics without much say so in the projects themselves.

All that would change. It had to. Humans did not have enough genetic diversity. Whether because there were so few, or they had kept out the war genes in the first few generations. When they didn't know which genes caused the aggression. Many died with no descendants who may have needed to pass on their genes. The war genes weren't wanted. More diversity was.

Narona arrived and signed a hello. "Are you ready to visit the smaller village?"

"No." He signed rather than spoke. "They talk more than I want to."

"You have to meet them and work with their leader."

Leonard's hand shook. Men as leaders. Women led most villages, except the male villages. It didn't feel safe. Not with the recurring dreams. The men in those dreams lived in mixed groups,

and weren't safe. If Genetica men were unsafe, he didn't want to meet them.

"I'll go. I may return."

"Of course you'll return."

"I mean sooner. You can do the talking."

"No. We need you. I don't know anything about building bridges."

"Can't they stay on their island and ferry their work over like they always have?" He peered back at the wall he had repaired the top layer of. Moss would regrow in a sun cycle or two. The people needed to regrow their population.

"No. It is time for them to return. We need to be able to travel by solar cart to them, and them to the rest of the world."

Narona sat down beside him. "I know the dreams scare you. Maybe meeting them will help."

"Do you think the dreams exist in their village?"

"I haven't heard any mention of them. And I have to go there once a moon cycle." She held out her hand.

He touched her fingertips and stood up. "Is Ria coming with us?"

"No."

He followed Narona down the trail that led to the smaller village. Genetica. The name said it all. The men whose genes were most valued had been sent here for generations. For a generation of their lives. After that, they had been able to go elsewhere, though most stayed.

As they walked under the tree canopy and listened to the wild life, his mind began to wonder. Back to the young man whose name he had heard in the dreams beyond dreams. Jendal. A name with no meaning on Galataria.

The place he had last been seen was similar to a trainer's place. He never appeared to leave it. No apprenticeship. No life. No family. No friends. Only tables and chairs. And noise. Sometimes screaming and yelling. Other young adults throwing things at each other, and at older adults.

He shook his head. The dreams were nightmares. The fleeting beauty that had once appeared, now gone. No rays of sunshine, or flowers, animals, plants. Nothing that brought life to life.

Was Jendal one of the men in Genetica? Was that how men had lived on Galataria since the wars? No one he knew could answer those questions. Not even Narona. He had asked her. In her views, boys were raised a little stricter than in their own villages. Nothing like what his dreams showed.

The river split around a heavily treed island. A small boat was tethered to a rope across the river to the island. It didn't look inviting. Dark and forbidding. Different from the trees and forest back home. It didn't take long to cross, gliding across the water by pulling along the lower rope strung loosely below the one the boat was attached to.

After a long walk, a gate appeared in front of them. A simple gate. Two stone columns with an arch over the top, about the height of two people, and the width of five. A rock wall cascaded downward into the trees and vegetation on either side provided the open gate with support to remain standing.

"Admiring the handiwork?" Narona leaned against the gate and smiled at him. "Is it as good as yours?"

He ran his hand across a few moss-covered stones. The scratch marks were almost visible. Much too old to not be covered. "It should be purely moss by now."

"They clean it off once a sun cycle. Claim it is for structural integrity. I think it is mainly to keep it looking shiny." She stepped on through the gate. "We have a lot to do."

Instead of going on, he waited. He had to verify the gate was wide enough for a solar cart to pass through. It wasn't wide enough for large solar carts. The path had to be widened to accommodate solar cart travel from the river to the gate, and he would build a turn off since the gate was too narrow for more than one small solar cart.

The worst obstacle so far was the concern for the forest. It was still considered unacceptable to cut trees higher than knee high without planning and authorization. Many tall trees would have to be cut. Some that may have even seen the Devolution War as saplings. Since the bridge had been authorized, he'd have to find a way to cause the least damage to the ecosystem on this side of the river.

Something nagged at his subconscious. It wasn't the trees. The thought kept flitting out of reach, rather like a butterfly searching for the most colorful flowers.

Leonard turned from the narrow archway to glance at the village of Genetica. A village of men. A place where the legators of much of the region, and known world, lived.

He breathed in. It was small. Too small. A group of small homes scattered among the trees, which crept close about them. Too little genetic variation. Narona had told him not to expect much. It didn't even look as big as Yellowwood.

"Is this all of the houses?"

She turned back to sign. "Yes. Most house three or four men, so it isn't as bad as it looks."

"Where do they practice their skills after they apprentice?"

"It varies." Narona motioned him on. "Some stay a short time each moon cycle and travel a lot. Others stay here all the time. The ones who stay help build the charged tablets and other equipment we all need with supplies from Dinah."

Some homes appeared as if they had been built long ago, and barely maintained. While a few looked newer, made of recycled materials. Fresh and ready for life. He followed her through the village to a larger building beyond the irregular row of homes.

No dogs roamed or slept by doors. A few sleek cats roamed the path. Few flowers or decorations. No young children. No women, other than Narona, in sight.

Leonard struggled. It felt strange. A place where women didn't go to on their own. Rather like something from the nightmare world he had dreamed of.

Pieces of unidentifiable equipment were scattered around outside the large building.

A man stepped out of the door and walked toward them. His clothes were unpatched, clean, and taken care of. Shoes similar to what Leonard, and the women he knew, wore. Similar, although different from anything he expected. Trainers didn't specify that men couldn't be trusted. He knew from history they hadn't been. As well as the nightmares that haunted him. This man did not resemble those monster men Jendal had met in the dream world. Most of the worst appeared to be in a talking box, not people Jendal personally knew.

He breathed. This man may be okay.

"Hello." The man walked up to a stone table. "Sit. We can stay out here."

Narona stepped up to the table. "Clovis. Good to see you. This is Leonard."

Leonard sat next to Narona. It was her place to talk at this point.

Clovis sat across from them. "It's nice to meet you Leonard. I've never met a man not raised by other men. Sometime, I'll show you around, and learn how different it is."

"It shouldn't be much different." Narona glanced at Leonard.

He had been about to say something. Her eyes reminded him to not comment, so that he wouldn't ramble into the nightmare world and bring it here, into the pristine place they lived.

The talk passed back and forth about the plan for the bridge between Maryiana and Genetica. It had to reach between the mainland and the island. Cover the water, not be washed away, and not disturb the spawning ground of a special fish, which type Leonard didn't quite recognize.

Another man appeared with a tray and four drinks.

Clovis motioned to the man. "Blaise, are you joining us?"

The man nodded. "I brought fresh water for our guests." He sat the tray down at the empty spot and passed out the wooden cups.

Leonard tasted the water. Fresh warm water with a hint of salt and river greenery. Perfectly refreshing. He drained the cup. As he glanced up, he noticed Blaise staring at him.

The man smiled. "Sorry. Your features are so familiar."

Narona glanced at her charged tablet. "Blaise? I thought you'd moved by now."

"No. I stayed to teach the few young men who stay here. Eventually, there may not be many whose parentas send them to the training villages."

She turned toward Leonard. "Blaise is your legator. He legated close to the maximum number of children."

The maximum number. About seventy-five children. In a few sun cycles, he would be old enough to be a legator. It was an enormous responsibility. Not all who volunteered were chosen by women to legate a child. Even those who were chosen only donated once a moon cycle. Even with seventy-five children per man, there weren't

enough women not related to them to keep the genetic diversity from causing potential birth defects.

In fact, Doctor Janel and Healer Ropen had recently sent Narona a letter about an increase in third generation genetic disorders that no healers had seen in several generations. If more genetic diversity was not found, many health issues would re-occur. There was no know way to find, or create, varied genetics. Even stored genetic material only lasted viably for a few generations.

Narona touched his fingertip before signing. "Leonard, do you need some alone time?"

"Sorry. Thinking about the genetic concerns we discussed a few light cycles ago. I wish there was some way to increase the diversity, safely."

"There are a few ways. Not super safe. We could increase the number of talkies. Though, I think the mix we have now is safest. Close to equal."

Clovis laughed. "We need talkies for leadership and people skills. Too many, and we might lead to the ancestral wars."

"Is it strictly controlled?" Leonard leaned closer.

Narona closed her charged tablet. "No. We can't really control it. Only by the knowledge of who the legator and parenta are. Though we don't recommend women chose only a talkie, or only a signer, for a legator. Better for a mix."

His brain whirled. Something about the conversation, and his nightmares touched his brain deep down. Some answer was there. If he could find it, reach it, and implement it.

Chapter 18 - Earth

Jendal - Age 12

Jendal pushed himself awake. Another day. Another noise pit. This alternative school didn't even try to teach. They separated the kids by size, rather than class and age. He should have been in sixth grade. He wasn't. They didn't even recognize grade levels here.

Uncle Henry parked the car at the school entrance. He turned to Jendal. "Mask on?"

Jendal nodded. It was on. The mask that hid his feelings and thoughts from the world. The mask he wore any time he wasn't at home. It was tiring to constantly hide his thoughts and feelings. It didn't feel right. His thoughts drifted to the other place, where they didn't wear masks. Leonard was his name. He was a builder, and important in his community.

"Show me." Uncle Henry's words pulled Jendal back out of the dream world.

Jendal tugged at his hair line and chin. Nothing moved. He wiped his hand across his lips to remove his smile.

"It won't always be this way." Henry looked away. "We don't like it any more than you."

"Mom said she would take me with her when she goes to work at Emerging Lineages. It won't be long. Maybe they will let me work with her. School isn't safe." It was the most Jendal had said at one time in a long time. His hands clenched the book for today. One on biochemistry wrapped in the faded comic book cover.

"I wish you could. It isn't that easy. It's a difficult world out there."

"If we both work, we can pay the bills."

Henry nodded. "I know. We've put down roots here, and want to stay. I wish we could help you and your mom more. She'll find a nice place for you both. You'll have your own room."

Jendal looked away. "I don't want to leave home. Or Tamela. She's three. She needs me to teach her to read and write."

Uncle Henry smiled. "We don't want you to go either."

Jendal opened the truck door and stepped down to the ground. A few more days, and they'd move. Thankful as he was to hear Henry's words, somehow, they weren't comforting.

He trudged in through the school's front doors. There was a line of students and staff waiting to go through the metal detector. An annoyance more than a safety measure. It always detected belt buckles. And never more serious dangers, such as sharp shaved plastic tools often used by the bullies to attack, cut, and slice those who ignored their demands.

Once past the metal detector and on through the door, he hurried to check in with his teacher. The teacher never stayed in the room after the 8 am bell. Where he went, none of the students knew. Be there by 8 am, and again at 3 pm, and you were counted as staying all day. What the students did the rest of the day, and where they went, was entirely up to them.

The teacher peered at him as he sat down. "Jendal, the librarian, Ms. Evelyn, wants to see you today."

Jendal nodded before he ran out of the room.

The library was a dump at this school. Half the books weren't even on shelves in the main room, which was the only section accessible to the students. The other shelves, behind a locked door, were organized.

When he turned the corner to the library, he glanced back. No one was near. He snuck in the door, and watched for attacking teens. None in sight.

Ms. Evelyn pointed to a closed door. A room students were not normally allowed in. Except for him, and a couple of others. Not that many students entered the library anyway. Not here. Unless their teachers brought them in.

Inside this room was peace. A slice of the world he hadn't seen in real life. Here he learned how people assumed everyone lived. Large, nice, clean places, with nice, friendly friends and neighbors. Animals. History lessons. He explored the depths of science, oceans, universe, life, and more. A beautiful world he dreamed of visiting. Maybe Leonard was there. Somewhere.

He checked his secret work station in here. It was shared with Opal, who had followed him to the alternative school. She had been

sent here for fighting back against Penny. After years of Penny attacking her vocally and physically, one punch landed Opal in the alternative school. Penny had remained at the other school, to attack more teens.

A note from Ms. Evelyn was on top of a stack of books they were reading and working their way through. "Put aside your studies today. It's time for the entrance exam."

Jendal smiled. The entrance exam for the Alaska Homeschool Program. They had agreed he and Opal could join the program, if they passed an entrance exam to determine their grade level.

He placed his biochemistry book carefully on top of the orderly stack already there. He then went over to the computer station to log in.

Opal would be there soon and take the computer across from him.

If they passed, Ms. Evelyn would officially be their teacher of a two-person class at the school for disruptive youth.

The test was long and tiring. They didn't even go out for lunchtime. Ms. Evelyn brought lunches to them. It took all day to complete the test. Reading, writing, math, science, history, and even art were covered. He knew he wouldn't remember the nuances of art. He had studied a few books on art. Few existed in the library. Art classes at their previous school had ended when the crayons were used as weapons.

Jendal walked out of the building after most of the students had left.

Uncle Henry waited to bring him home.

Jendal's smile slipped off his face. Home. That wouldn't be home soon.

Uncle Henry closed his eyes when Jendal swung into the truck. "News tonight. Keep your mask on."

Jendal touched his face. The mask protected him at school. It was loosened in the study room of the library. Normally, at home, he removed it. To be himself. Everyone there understood him. Most of the time.

Jendal picked at his plate of food. The mashed potatoes had gravy on them, which made the normally soft delicious treat too

slimy and cantankerous to enjoy. He could swallow it, if he closed his eyes.

His mother touched his hand.

He looked at her.

"Not going to finish?" She signed.

"No. What is it?"

"Tell me about your day." Her hand shook as the words cracked awkwardly across to him.

"Opal and I took the homeschool test."

"How do you think you did?"

"Good. I hope. It's a chance. I want to learn. I know I can, no matter what the teachers, or Dr. Grendal say." His hands tired. It was so rare to chat so much by sign language. As much as he preferred it to spoken. Written was easier.

His mother looked away and back.

Uncle Henry was on the other side of the table.

Aunt Zalena had taken Tamela to clean the mashed potatoes she had smeared on the table off of her hands.

"State wanted me to take a genetic test to prove I am your biological." Her hands shook even more. The last word could have been mother, or moth.

He touched the tip of her fingers. "Of course you are my mother."

She shook her head. "Your genetics are on file. You are not genetically related to me, your donor, or anyone on file anywhere in the world."

He laughed. "Doesn't mean anything. You know how chimeras are."

"I know. You may be related to both myself, and your donor. If they knew where to find the other chimera cells in our bodies. The state doesn't agree. They don't know about chimeras."

"They can't do anything." Heat rose up through his body. Jendal's hands clenched into fists.

"They did. They decided they will take me away from you."

"What?" He jumped up.

"They don't believe I am related to you. They think I stole you as a baby." Her hands rested on the table. Her beautiful hands, hardworking hands. Darker than his own, they matched the world of

his toddlerhood. They had given him safety for twelve years. As long as he could remember, and before.

Jendal turned to Uncle Henry. "Don't let them send her to jail. I need my mother."

"They won't."

He turned to his mother.

"I was able to convince them I hadn't stolen you. I was unconscious when you were born. The consequences."

"There shouldn't be any."

"They said I had two choices. Make you work with Madella."

Jendal slapped the table. "No. Never."

Tamela screamed.

"I took the other one. I have to leave tonight. Go away. Legally, I can't have any contact with you. They tried to say forever. However, after you turn eighteen, you will be able to find me."

Jendal dropped his head to the table. The world whirled around him. His home. The only place he wanted to be.

Uncle Henry patted the table in front of him. He used words instead of signs to reach Jendal. "You'll stay here with us. They are allowing Aunt Zalena and I to adopt you. Everyone else has to leave."

Jendal looked up.

Tears slipped down his mother's cheeks as she signed. "For some backwards reason, they believe fewer adults in the home will make your home life more stable, instead of less stable. Aunt Irma and Aunt Clare will come with me. We will have enough people to work to survive where we are going."

"You are going tonight?"

His mother looked at Uncle Henry. "They told me I have to. Aunt Irma and Aunt Clare will pack everything up and we will all move tomorrow."

"Where?" His hands shook as he tried to sign more. His thoughts and feelings rushed into a whirlwind of color and gushing sound.

"Emerging Lineages, the genetics clinic. Aunt Irma and Aunt Clare have found jobs nearby."

Jendal felt the rage slink down to an ember. His mom might not be his mother. She was telling him where she would be, and with who. And how to contact her as soon as he turned eighteen. A

whole six years away. Half the number of years he had already lived. "Where will you stay tonight?"

"At the hotel. Help me pack an overnight bag." She held out her hand.

He took her hand as he had always done. Even as an infant. A toddler. A child.

For the next hour, they talked while she packed. More words than signs as she needed her hands to pack. And her mind reverted to her earlier communication style. The one that wasn't his.

She picked up her bag.

He picked Owly up off the pillow. "Take him. May he protect you."

"Are you sure? You need him here to remember me." She held the owl close to her.

"I'm sure." He turned and sat on the bed. Jendal refused to watch her walk away. The empty place on her side of the room was somehow smaller than the empty place in his heart.

Uncle Henry stopped by a few minutes later to check on him. He signed a simple hello.

"Did they complete the adoption?"

Uncle Henry nodded.

"Do I have your last name now?"

Uncle Henry glanced toward the front door. "Do you want it?"

"No." Jendal looked at his hands. "I mean. You take care of me. It's all I have of my mother."

Uncle Henry sat down beside him on the bed. "We did everything we could. We didn't want to worry you. It was all we could do to protect you. They wanted us all to go to jail, and you to be sent off to some other state where none of us would find you."

"Why?"

"That's the way they are. They don't understand."

Jendal wiped a tear away. "What stopped them?"

Uncle Henry touched his shoulder. "The brave thing you did today."

He looked up at the closest thing to a father he had ever known.

"You took a tough homeschool test. Your pre-tests showed your promise. Your librarian, Ms. Evelyn, and all of us, convinced them, for you to be successful, you had to stay where you are, not be

moved." Uncle Henry waited a while before he left. "I'll be here if you need me."

Jendal knew. Everything had changed. This time he was alone. More alone than ever. Even surrounded by people he knew and trusted. He curled up on the bed with his mother's pillow held close. All he had of her to remember her by. Hot tears spilled down his cheeks.

Chapter 19 - Galataria

Leonard - Age 14

Sunshine sparkled in the water flowing swiftly under the bridge created between Maryiana and Genetica. Birds sang and flitted in the sky overhead. A butterfly landed beside Leonard in the fresh plaster on the stones.

He reached out his hand to help the butterfly out of the cement.

It wiggled its antenna at him as he checked to be sure the feet of the tiny creature did not keep any plaster on them. It fluttered away to a newly planted rose garden on the Maryiana side.

The bridge sparkled in the sunshine. Freshly constructed stone and cement laid over steel beams from the ghost city. The stonework needed to finish drying for a few light cycles before any solar carts could be driven over it. For now, it was time to rest and admire the work. And verify no safety flaws existed. Stone color changes were an allowed, and sometimes admired flaw, as long as the materials were of equal strength and durability. The color changes created an alternating striped pattern of darker and lighter stonework, to highlight the bridge for boats in most weather. Or at least any weather in which a boat should be out on the water.

A bird fluttered past him in a hurry.

He turned to the Maryiana side. Narona and Ria walked toward him carrying a covered basket between them. They signed their welcomes from the distance without disturbing any more wildlife, including the rabbit at his side.

So unlike the noisy talkie universe that haunted his nightmares.

They sat beside him on the bridge. Narona opened the basket and handed him a bowl of meat and vegetable stew.

He signed to her before taking it. "How did the compatibility testing go?"

"We have both had some genetic drift. More than expected. Within acceptable bounds though." She took a bowl for herself. "Ria had the most drift. There is concern she may develop one of the later generational disorders that had disappeared."

Ria uncovered her bowl. "They can't leave me out of the program. A generation ago, the amount of drift I have was too much

to be considered to be a parenta. Or, I could only have a few children."

Leonard allowed that thought to digest as they ate. Most people were encouraged to have biological children, a few with throwback, potentially dangerous genetics were not recommended, or even allowed, in some extremely rare cases. They could adopt, and often did.

His own grandparenta had offered a son and a few daughters for adoption for those less fortunate in her parenta generation. Partially, she didn't have as much time to be a parenta with her second apprenticeship. She had combined tree genetics, musical instruments, and training. She also hadn't had a home partner to share with, like Ria and Narona's parentas.

Which was worse? To want to have children, and not be allowed? Or to not want children, and feel pressured to in order to help maintain a viable community? Even his own grandparenta had thought they would be viable, and not in this position by the time he was old enough to be tested.

"I'll go next quarter moon. What will they say about me?" He handed a piece of lettuce to the rabbit warming his hip.

Narona dropped her spoon in her bowl. "Don't tell them about the nightmares." Her signing hands dropped to her lap for a moment as she looked at Ria. Some silent eye signs passed between them. Too silent.

Ria slurped her stew. She placed the bowl on the ground. Her hands lifted to begin a sign. They shook.

"What is it?" Leonard could sense a pain and emptiness. Almost as empty as the feeling in the nightmare world.

"We uncovered an accident."

"An accident?"

Ria glanced at Narona before she signed. "When your legation happened. No one is sure what went wrong. The growing pan had created a double cell structure. Of identical twins. Power flickered. The sample was gone. A flash of light. When it returned, it contained only one set of cells."

"What happened?"

Narona took over the story. "My trainer says they don't know. Your twin winked out of existence. They waited and ran tests to be sure you were okay."

"Does my legator know?"

"He may. He is still here. Have you talked to Blaise?"

"No. Not frequently. Feels wrong to know him when so few people meet their legators." Leonard rubbed the rabbit's ears. "I'll work with him next quarter moon widening the path to Genetica."

Narona sipped her remaining stew. "He never donated again. There may have been a discussion that wasn't documented."

Or forgotten. Something that important shouldn't be forgotten.

"What do I need to say when I go?"

"As little as possible. We are researching as much as we can." Narona placed her bowl back in the basket.

Ria added her signs. "I've been writing to your parenta for her memories. Neither Arilla, nor Gilbertan, have the nightmares you and she share. Your parenta's ended a few moons ago. The last dream scared her. She is sure the mind she connected with died a bloody death."

Leonard closed his eyes. His worst nightmare had seen scenes he'd rather forget. Many in the last sun cycle had been violent. Violence toward the mind he visited. It was a mind and body. One that couldn't communicate like he could.

His mind, and body might be genetically identical to him. Or, at least was at conception. The genetic drift would have changed him. Jendal could have been him. He opened his eyes before signing. "How indistinguishable?"

Narona looked away, even though her signs faced him. "We don't know. His experiences and environment have changed his genes. What you have told us has been so scary, his genetics will be damaged. We know that the lifestyle from before the wars, damaged genetics. Sometimes irreversibly."

Ria held up her hand. It trembled. "The environment there that you tell us about. It will have caused irreparable harm to his genetics. To his mind. And even his body."

Leonard leaned forward and covered his eyes. Jendal. A broken mess. That he knew. The young man had been kept in a trainer's room. With little outside sunshine or air. No animals, plants, or wildlife in his memory. Not natural life. He sat up straight. "Can we reach him, except in the nightmares?"

"Even if we did. History." Ria couldn't continue. Her hand dropped to her lap, and she looked over to the village of Genetica.

"We don't know what caused the accident. Nor how to create another one. Not sure that we want to, even if it were possible. You couldn't live there. Jendal wouldn't be allowed to live here. He could be dangerous." Narona reached over to pet the rabbit. "Not intentionally, of course. Because of what he has lived through."

Leonard knew what she was trying to say. To bring Jendal here might unleash the horrors of history that they had recovered from. Except for the loss of genetic diversity among the humans. "Why did you tell me?"

Narona glanced at Ria and back. "You cross between worlds. If you could bring some genes back."

"How? How would I know they were safe genes? It's all images. In my head. I don't have the words for some of what I hear. And see. Or saw. The words were mentioned in history training. I didn't learn it. It didn't seem appropriate. Now his thoughts are all anger and walls."

"I don't know if it is possible." Narona picked up a pebble and placed it on his knee. "This will leave my genetic residue on the pebble. Until the rain washes it away. Is it enough? We don't know. If it was, the museums be a place to rescue some forgotten genetics. We are working on it. You though. You go to a place with living humans, a world we can't reach."

Her eyes bored into his. "You are our hope." Her eyes and hands dropped. Tears rolled down her cheeks.

Eye contact. No one ever looked in each other's eyes on Galataria. Other than talkies. Or in that other world. Eye contact meant more a glance at a shoulder or face, before turning the head to tilt an ear near a talkie, or watching sign language. In the other world. Eye contact meant something quite different. Had that happened in Galataria's history too?

The silence grew. Not the easy silence he was used to. It was more uneasy. A slight concern. Fear for the future of both worlds. As that other world raced to become what Galataria had once become. Could Galataria save that other world? Stop the war before it began and prevent the damage and loss of humanity?

Leonard pushed the empty bowl away. "Narona."

"Yes?" Her eyes glanced across his right shoulder, to show she meant yes, and hoped he had a solution.

"With your genetic training, can you build new ones? Repair them? Give us more diversity?"

She glanced at his left shoulder. "If that knowledge existed, it was lost in the wars."

"Our grandparentas used it to bring back the trees and plants." He leaned closer. Desperate for a solution.

"If they did, we aren't allowed to use it. The Matrilineal Council may have banned it from use in humans." Narona turned to face the bridge. "I wish they hadn't. We need the lost knowledge."

Ria held her hand out to talk. "It's the history. They don't want the geneticists to have too much control over who is born, and who dies. The genetic differences. They want to keep as much as possible."

"They do prevent so many from being born. What happened?"

Ria looked at Narona.

Narona nodded. "It's a secret. We don't know all of it. Only the Matrilineal Council knows it all. If they do."

Ria glanced at him. She looked all around to be sure no one was nearby. "The history we learned from the trainers was incomplete."

Leonard waited.

"During the Devolution War, some nations tried to stay out of the war." Ria appeared to be trying to connect the words she needed to share.

"Like the village where the men and women lived together, even now?" He wanted to help her find the right words.

Ria smiled. "Our nation was devastated. Many women lived, and only a few men. In fact, at one time, there were less than one hundred women left in our nation. Mostly families in a few hidden villages."

Leonard held his hand up to process that thought.

"There wasn't enough genetic diversity, as they were already too closely related." Narona stirred the leftovers in her bowl.

Ria nodded before lifting her hand. "Those women formed the Matrilineal Council. The council invited people from other nations to join us. Those who had more people left alive."

"Some scientists from Dinah arrived to help with the genetics. They encouraged twinning." Narona glanced at Ria. "They wanted to leave the remains of our nation, the one who started the

Devolution War, and take the shared knowledge. Even now, when they are genetically more stable, they don't choose to share with us."

Leonard gulped. "Another war would destroy what our parentas and grandparentas rebuilt."

Ria nodded. "They believed our former culture, the war culture, would die out, along with most of the people from our nation, if we didn't have enough diversity."

Narona picked up the bowls. "We are trying to convince the Matrilineal Council to request help. Request new genetics be sent here. If there are enough. The other former nations don't want to give up their differences for a more joined present and future."

"I thought the Matrilineal Council covered all of Galataria."

Ria handed her bowl to Narona. "It is taught that way. In a sense it is. They have representatives from all the former nations now. Many joined to form new, smaller cultures. It seems the struggles are real everywhere. We have to share. Although we all want to hold on to our past, who we once were. Even though we don't have any living memory of it."

Leonard handed his bowl to Narona. "Finding an answer isn't going to be easy."

The women walked back to Maryiana.

He turned his attention back to finishing the bridge. He let his thoughts wonder to the blighted past, and the uncertain future.

Chapter 20 - Earth

Jendal - Age 14

Sunshine slanted through the wooden fence. It played in the bird bath and frog pond nestled under the trees. A small red bird splashed water out of the bird bath onto the book Jendal held open in his hands.

Tamela raced out with two cups of water. She sat down beside him. Both cups splashed out onto the tiny wild violets.

Jendal laughed at her. At five years old, Tamela raced around everywhere. Often followed by the family cat. Full of energy and life. Always ready to do something.

"Read. Read Sleeping Beauty before Opal is here." She flopped on her belly in the dappled shady mossy overgrowth.

Jendal glanced at her. So much like Alice in that other kid's story. Perhaps Through the Looking Glass would be the next story he read to her. He opened to the first page and pointed at the too colorful pictures in the Sleeping Beauty book. Jendal read the first few words while he watched her expressions.

She looked up at him. "If you're not going to read it to me, give me the book, and I'll read to you." She grabbed it out of his hands and read.

Or did she? He leaned back against a tree and tried to pay attention as the story she "read" drifted through at least three other fairy tales.

His eyes drifted closed. This place resembled the one that his dream friend, Leonard had grown up in. He felt safe here. Almost safe. Sometimes shouts from other yards interrupted the natural peace. Today was a nice quiet evening. With few sounds. A time to drift off to that other world and watch Leonard alone with two young women his own age on a bridge.

In that other world, insects buzzed, and wild animals played near the stone fences that Leonard had built. There wasn't anything stopping him from going anywhere he wanted to.

He smiled in his dreams and rested his arms above his head. He had Opal. Leonard had Ria and Narona. Whoever he was, wherever he was, his dream friend had a happy life. Jendal had

never known his dream friend to have any stress. Always beauty. Only peace.

Something brushed his arm.

He jerked awake.

Tamela laughed.

Opal sat beside him.

"Happy fourteenth birthday." He sat up and grinned. "Guess I drifted off."

"Your little butterfly read you to sleep."

Tamela laughed as she ran to the house, with the cat right behind her.

"Her tales led off into my dream world."

Opal smiled. "Your Aunt Zalena and Uncle Henry will be ready for the barbecue in a few minutes."

"Enjoy the peace and quiet beside me." Jendal leaned back against the tree and took the drink Opal handed him.

She leaned back against the trunk.

A frog jumped into the frog pond beside them. The pond itself was full of tiny tadpoles. Ones Jendal planned to watch grow into frogs and leave their own tadpoles to grow. If they found enough insects to eat in the yard.

The bird bath and bird feeder helped. Bird droppings brought some bugs, even though the birds ate the bugs as often as the frogs did.

"Is that one of our frogs?" Opal pulled a long grass blade and stirred the frog pond water to let more oxygen in.

"Yes, it is." They had raised tadpoles for a biology project a couple of times. One had been a basic project, and another a simple genetics project. They were easy to raise and keep hidden in the alternative school. Tadpoles didn't need sunlight like peas or chickens did.

A few minutes later Uncle Henry walked outside to prepare the grill.

They ignored him, since he didn't call for them to help.

"What kind of birthday cake did you choose?" Opal gathered a few small twigs together to place next to the frog pond.

"A yellow cake. Did you have birthday cakes when you were little?"

She nodded. Opal's family didn't understand her, and had tried to throw a loud party at a noisy, flashing lights pizza place for her the previous year. This year, they had forgotten her birthday. On purpose.

For some reason, her parents assumed the surprise, and change from her daily routine would be appreciated, instead of causing panic. They had also invited several unwelcome relatives who disrespected her, and her differences. In addition to the booming, deafening noise, and constant blaring, motion of multi colored lights. She had thrown up on the birthday pizza. Not a good ending to an outing she didn't want. Nor, had she anticipated an outing.

Opal's idea of a good way to spend a birthday was similar to his. Simple. Peaceful. A good book. Good food. And relaxation.

Aunt Zalena walked outside with the food. She nodded in their direction.

Tamela ran back out with something white in her hand. She raced up to him and dropped it in his lap.

A letter for him. It was addressed to Uncle Henry. He recognized the handwriting. Jendal opened it. It was a short and simple letter from his mother. A congratulations to Opal on turning fourteen. He smiled.

Four more years before the state allowed him to visit his mother again. It had been more than two years since the state had taken her away from him. A long two years.

Jendal had worked many long hours at school, and at home, to prove her right, and the state wrong. He could learn. He would learn. He'd join her at Emerging Lineages someday.

"What will you wish for?" Tamela relaxed on her belly and kicked her legs in the air.

"That's supposed to be a secret." Opal smiled at him. She tickled Tamela with a longer branch from the tree overhead.

Jendal nodded. His one wish was for the peace and calm of today to last forever. With his mother here by his side. To be able to read all the books that existed and live life. To explore the world with his mother and Opal. The three of them. To go places where people weren't. Find life that had been forgotten by most people. To bring that forgotten, unknown life alive, and keep it hidden and safe

from people who would harm it. Always able to return home to Aunt Zalena and Uncle Henry.

Soon, the grilled chicken and corn on the cob were ready. They all gathered around the picnic table and enjoyed the relaxing evening. It was beautiful. Peaceful.

Almost too peaceful.

Jendal hurried down the alternative school hallway to the library. Opal would be right behind him. The rest of the students weren't even allowed in the building for another half hour. He and Opal entered a side door and hurried to their private classroom every day.

They wouldn't leave the hidden library classroom until all the other students were gone for the day. Not even for lunch or bathroom breaks. The librarian, Ms. Evelyn, was happy to share her private bathroom with them, if they helped keep it clean.

A few more days until the end of the semester. They'd have to decide what to do for summer break. Last year, they had returned most of summer break to study and learn. That gave them some freedom to work in the empty, almost functional, science lab and practice what they had learned. During the school year, they worked in the lab on Saturdays so they wouldn't be too far behind. A science teacher from the local college visited on those days and assisted them during the experiments, often with his own equipment and supplies.

They had about caught up to grade level. Which meant moving on to the Alaska Homeschool Program high school the next year. Perhaps.

Would they be allowed, or required, to go back to regular high school? Or stay here, in their own private class? Ms. Evelyn had talked about adding a new student to their private class. Someone that all three of them could trust.

Since Jendal and Opal had become their own class, the dangers of them being out in the school building had increased. One of the bullies had even spray-painted death threats on the library door. At that point, the administration had declared them unenrolled, and adjusted their special class hours.

Footsteps pattered down the hall.

He glanced back.

Opal ran towards him. Her face flushed. "Sorry I'm late. Piper got out, and I had to chase him back. Silly dog can't follow me to school."

Jendal laughed. "Let's go." He signed most conversations with Opal. She was getting better with his sign language. Uncle Henry and Aunt Zalena were improving. Tamela had picked it up as easy as if it were spoken words. Maybe easier.

They reached their destination together.

After an hour of biology study, they took a break. It was a calm moment, when the rowdy troubled youth were kept in class. A time when Jendal and Opal went out in the library itself if they wanted.

Jendal went to search for a book to read for their literature class. Something from Charles Dickens sounded perfect. A nice classic novel that reached the depths of the soul through an exploration of the mind and emotions attached to the simple stories. Stories with that level of depth into the character's soul were rare in modern literature. Depth had been replaced by action, and guessing the intended emotion.

Noise echoed down the corridors. Shouts. A scream.

Unusual. It should be muted, with a steady hum of sound from the other students. He flattened against the wall.

Opal opened the private classroom door. She and Ms. Evelyn stepped out into the library.

He signed for them to go back in and lock the door.

They either didn't understand, or didn't do as he suggested.

Ms. Evelyn ran and locked the main door to the library.

A gun shot rang down the hall.

More shouts.

Opal cried next to him and leaned her head on his arm.

He tried to comfort her. It didn't work. His mind raced and whirled through thoughts and feelings too fast to take any action. Colors superseded words and emotions. Shapes appeared that dissolved back into color.

Another shot ricocheted down the hall. Closer this time.

Jendal snapped back to awareness for a moment. He pushed Opal into the study room.

Ms. Evelyn was nowhere in sight. The door to the hallway stood open.

Jendal knew the peace he longed for wasn't of this world.

He grabbed a board with holes along its length and dashed into the hallway.

The scene was too gruesome to behold. Two students and Ms. Evelyn were on the floor. Red spread across their outfits. They wouldn't be getting up. He turned his eyes toward the boy with the gun. The one who had taunted him and Opal for over a year, and forced them to not attend even lunch with the other students. The young man who had written the threats on the library door.

Opal screamed.

Colors he had never known twirled as he lunged forward waving the heavy board. A rushing wind raced past him. More screams. Another gunshot.

What happened after, he had no memory of. Even days later. All he knew was the tiny locked room. All he heard were memory screams. All he saw was a dull grey wall. And a dull grey blanket.

No words. No sounds. No water.

No books. No hope.

If only he could reach the peaceful place. The place where brilliant colors and echoing screams did not haunt him.

For the first time in his life, he wanted to hear a voice. Any voice. If only for a second. The most important voice being his mother's. Her soft soothing tones that weren't even words were what he needed right now. And Owly. Or Bunny.

They were all gone.

There was only grey.

Shades of grey.

Chapter 21 - Galataria

Leonard - Age 15

The bridge no longer glistened. Leonard ambled across, checking the cracks and crevices for moss, mold, mildew, and damage from the solar carts. Little damage in a sun cycle. About midway, he stopped. A tiny sapling had taken root between two stones.

A sapling couldn't be left in the middle of the bridge railing. In a generation, or maybe two, the roots would pull the bridge into the river below. He pulled out his knife to gently wedge the sapling roots out from between the rocks to replant it on the bank along the river. Either on the Maryiana side, or the Genetica side. He tucked the sapling in the carrying case he wore on his shoulder.

Somehow, and some way, this seemed the time to sit and look at his work. No solar carts crossed the bridge until late light, if then. The culmination of his first apprentice skill. Earlier than most, it was time to choose a gentler on the body skill. He hadn't chosen one to train for. And didn't really want to. Another bridge could be built before his body prevented building as a skill he could complete.

The sapling belonged here. Almost more than him. His other half, his twin, was lost in some world where his genetics would be lost to Galataria. The circular emotions Jendal felt transfixed Leonard. In a way that Leonard almost understood. The history of Galataria meant he had to understand it. To reach his brother through the swirls of emotion.

All the more reason he must stay in the moment to leave his own contribution in this world. Once that was done, he had to try in every way possible to reach Jendal, and rescue him if possible. Even if it meant going to that other world to protect him. If that was even possible.

His mind drifted at the memory of Jendal. The young man whose face he had never seen. It must look like his own. He reached up to touch his own smooth face. Soft, no damage from the stone work of his first apprentice skill. Many stoneworkers had taken damage from chipping stone. It was a silent and personal skill. A skill talkies avoided, as they preferred talking while working.

His eyes drifted, trying to see through the eyes of Jendal.

A grey wall rose up around him. One with a tiny window set up high, out of reach. He turned. A grey wall, and a grey door, with a palm sized window in it. The body of Jendal sat on a rough cot against a wall. Nothing else in the room. No color. No light. Nothing to touch except the cold wall, floor, and a rough grey blanket that blended in with the wall.

Leonard gasped. There was nothing. Jendal's early life had little sensory input, in the two-room home. With his Bunny for a companion. Then on to too much sensory input, more an assault on all the senses in the trainer places he had been. Each worse than the last. Here there was nothing. No one to sign with. The whole room was the same shade of dull grey. Nothing to see, hear, taste, touch, or smell.

He reached into the mind of Jendal. The young man's mind seemed to be a maze. Bright and colorful thoughts swirled like a winter blizzard. Obscuring everything around him. The dull grey walls disappeared into whirling flashing intense painful colors.

One emotion was constant. Something strange. Something Leonard had never felt in his own mind. It had an energy of its own. Slashing and attacking the thoughts and memories it found as it raced through the past, present, and future of Jendal's mind.

He slipped off that idea. It was too strong. He found another one pursuing it. A memory. As he followed it, a picture appeared in Leonard's mind. A woman. A woman whose beauty he had seen before. A beauty hidden under the guise of wrinkles, and a slash on her cheek that wasn't there before. He knew that face. It had held the silently crying Jendal when he was a toddler. Then, her tears had mingled with Jendal's. And even Leonard's as he had not known what had caused them.

His shoulder jerked to one side and his mind pulled back to Galataria. He pushed at what had touched him.

"Careful!"

He opened his eyes.

Blaise had fallen on the bridge, at least several feet from him. He had landed on his hands and feet, in an odd crab walk style.

Leonard's mouth opened. "Sorry. I was afraid you were a bear."

Blaise sat more comfortably. He rubbed his shoulder. "Sure. I'd believe you. I have to ask, were you in the other world?"

He nodded. "Not sure what is happening there. It isn't good." His hand finished signing and dropped to his lap. He looked over at the trail to Genetica. This bridge between worlds. Was it too late to save Galataria?

"Do you think you view time as it is, or maybe a past time?"

Leonard looked back at his legator. "I think it is current. Or almost current. Similar to a tablet communication lag."

Blaise stood up and held out his hand. "I'm too old to sit here long. A chilly wind is picking up."

He ignored the hand and stood up. The bag slipped open and the sapling roots slipped out. Leonard reached in to pull out the infant tree. It was still whole. This sapling had rooted on the bridge between the world of women and the world of men on Galataria. Two worlds so similar, and so different. Perhaps, this tree would build a bridge between two other worlds. The twig was too small to recognize which type of tree it was. Though he was sure his grandparenta could identify it. Even as little more than a twig, almost as tall as his hand was long.

"Where will you plant it?" Blaise waited on him.

Leonard led the way back to Genetica. "In a bucket for now. I don't know where its growing place will be." The shadow of the place it wanted to grow; a memory of a place not ready for the infant sapling crossed his mind. Much as the plans for all his building projects had done. A picture of what might be, should be, and/or could be.

Blaise followed him.

At least the silence on the way back to the village was peaceful. Blaise was a talkie. One of the few in Genetica. He had learned early to wait to vocalize unless around others like him. Though the talking helped him as a trainer. And even in his earlier skills, such as tool making.

Before long, they reached the table area they had built together. A place to prepare the supplies for the solar cart to pick up.

Leonard sat down on the trader's bench. It was good to rest. He shouldn't be tired. It wasn't the work. He hadn't done any physical labor. It was the intense emotions he had endured in Jendal's mind. Whatever they were. And the strange burning surge he had recognized when Blaise tried to rouse him. Something unknown. Unspoken. Something he knew he must hide.

Blaise brought him a small container and some dirt.

Leonard nodded his thanks and planted the tiny sapling. Where would it grow? Whose sun would it draw life from?

He scrambled down to the riverbank for a little fresh water. Water full of growth and growing things to help the tree reach for the sky.

Blaise waited nearby.

"I guess you want to know what I saw?"

He shook his head. "I saw your eyes when you woke. If it was too much, hold it for another time."

Leonard tilted his head. Blaise tried to understand. As far as he knew, he was the only person who had attempted to develop a friendship with his legator. It was an odd friendship. Not generally accepted in society, and certainly not expected. Most people never knew the name of their legator. That was maintained in Maryiana's databases and only those who helped choose genetically viable offspring read them.

Blaise wrapped a blanket around his shoulders.

Something about the motion tugged at a memory Leonard had seen in Jendal's world. "Do you wish you knew who you legated?"

Blaise looked up at him and smiled. "No. We are raised to treat everyone we meet as if they were family. Those younger as if we may have legated them, and older women as if they were our parentas."

"You didn't even know your parenta, did you?"

"No." Blaise glanced toward the village of Maryiana. "I sometimes think she is still there, and may see me from time to time. She might know who I am."

Leonard leaned back on his heels. "Might?"

"Boys are. Or were, named by the woman who fed them the first sun cycle of life, not by their parenta, most of whom never even held a baby boy they gave birth to. Even then, when the young boy went on to be raised in a men's village, his name might be changed."

"My grandparenta said she held her baby boy. She never said more about him."

He nodded. "Some did. I suspect many did, and do, as they say goodbye."

"Why do you think we separated the genders?" He had heard what Ria and Narona had said about the history. Did the men's villages feel the same way?

Blaise looked at the gateway to Genetica. "Shame. The men who survived the Devolution War were ashamed of what other men had done. To themselves, to each other, and to women. The women also felt shame. It was a way to prevent further shame. To begin the healing."

His legator took a stick and drew a circle in some loose dirt. And another circle close by. "Once, we had walls we have forgotten how to build between the villages. Long gone now. When we lost the building them knowledge, we hoped we had lost the need for them."

Leonard thought about that. With all the other information Ria and Narona had given him, it showed how much had been left out of his early training. "Do we need those walls again?"

"I hope not." Blaise turned his attention to a group of birds squabbling nearby.

Peace and tranquility. At a cost. Much was lost. Good and bad of a former way of life. Even the names of the nations that had existed were long gone. Had the scars scabbed over enough for a culture to heal? Was Jendal their hope for a future for Galataria?

Blaise raised his hand to sign. "What do you plan to train for in your second generation?"

Leonard smiled deep in his soul. His legator was trying to be kind. To help. To give him space in the only way he knew how. Words weren't the space he needed. He needed connection, not the distance spoken words created. "I haven't decided. I need to understand the genetics and the history more. Ria and Narona are helping me. Scared of it though. If I don't understand it, I can't help. It's a blizzard."

"A buzzard blizzard?"

He laughed. Yes. A noisy blizzard of emotions and thoughts. If he had been a woman, he would feel more confident about his emotions and his decisions. At least, in Galataria. He wouldn't be able to function in the other world. If he and Jendal had been girls instead of boys, life would have been easier here, and far worse there. He shuddered. Too many questions. And the answers based on history were terrible.

Somehow, he had to save both worlds. Bring safe genetics to Galataria, and hope to his brother's world. If he ever made it there, he could never return. That much he knew know, feeling those emotions that had scurried before him in Jendal's mind. Ever out of reach. That endless early war raged inside him. The nameless cultural nightmare memory.

Chapter 22 - Earth

Jendal - Age 15

Jendal pulled the grey blanket over his head. His mind replayed the events of the previous few weeks. None of them were warm and friendly. All were a nightmare. A living nightmare.

It had been almost a year since he had spent alone time with anyone he knew. Other than the lawyer they had found for him.

The trial was over. They had acquitted him on grounds of insanity. They wouldn't allow him to live free in society. Today, the government planned to transfer him to a place they said was safe. All for having stopped a school shooting that left Ms. Evelyn and two students dead.

When his breakfast was delivered, it was better than usual. Scrambled eggs. That hid a calming medicine. Something they believed he needed. For someone they had to move, and couldn't trust.

Before the ride, he'd be allowed to spend some time with Uncle Henry and Aunt Zalena. Even Opal was supposed to be there. What could he say to them that hadn't been said? The court saw him as more of a menace to society than the teen with a gun.

The court claimed he should have waited. Stayed in the library and locked the door with the shooter on the loose. He would have been safe. Police had arrived thirty minutes after the shooting ended. They found Jendal on his knees, passed out with his fingers touching the gun.

Jendal couldn't have waited. Opal had to be protected.

The gun the bully had used wouldn't have stopped shooting. The bully had shot through the library door. Shot at him. And Opal. The door had several bullet holes in it. One bullet had gone through the sleeve of his shirt, without grazing him. That was what the shooter had wanted. And he had laughingly told the administrators that multiple times. Even earlier that morning.

They court found Jendal guilty. Guilty for protecting himself. For protecting Opal. And everyone else. Three people had died to

protect him. He had lost his life to the justice system to protect the rest of the school.

Armed guards led him into the enclosed courtyard.

He didn't even look up to view the limited sunshine trying to peek over the three-story walls into the tiny dark alleyway they called a courtyard.

Uncle Henry and Aunt Zalena sat at a small table with Opal beside them.

The guards made him sit on the opposite side. Then they removed back a few feet. No privacy.

Jendal signed hello.

One guard poked him with a stick. "Use your words."

Words. Something he had almost forgotten. He spoke so little, that speaking was difficult. His mind formed the words. His voice box couldn't make the sounds anymore. It had forgotten how.

Opal glanced at him. Some signs were so subtle, the guards wouldn't pick them up.

Uncle Henry placed his hand on the table. "I wish we could do more. Something. Anything."

"Don't let my mother know. It would break her heart."

"She knows." Uncle Henry sighed. "She was at the trial. She wanted to protect you. No one listened."

They hadn't let him see her. A tear dripped down his cheek.

Opal touched his hand. "They made her watch the trial from a closed room. They didn't want her to change what you might say or do."

He closed his eyes and leaned back. His mother deserved a better son. One society would be proud of.

Aunt Zalena pulled out a photo of Tamela to show him. "The judge believed if we had forced you to work with Madella, you could have restrained yourself."

"No." He didn't even remember what happened. He couldn't, and shouldn't, have restrained himself when the teen bully had already killed three people.

"We all know she made it worse. Who knows what might have happened." Uncle Henry glanced at the guards.

Of course, they had to be careful what they said. The guards stayed close enough to hear every word they spoke. And add inferences to what was said, or not said.

"Tamela is doing good. She misses you."

"Is she still studying sign language?"

"She practices with Opal." Aunt Zalena touched Opal's fingertips. "Tell him."

"I'm going on. To become a lawyer." Her hand faltered in a partial sign as she glanced at the guards.

He understood. She'd try to rescue him someday.

"I'm sorry."

"It wasn't you." Uncle Henry touched Aunt Zalena's hand. "It was the world we live in. You saved countless people. It isn't right."

"I have no memory of it." Tears flowed. Colors swirled around his head. He rocked back and forth. With a great effort, he pulled back into himself, into the here and now.

"Am I dangerous? They said I am."

"No." Uncle Henry spoke slowly. "There are times in the past when you would have been, if you were going to be dangerous."

"Is it dangerous genetics? We don't know who I am." His throat constricted. It was dry, and rough.

Aunt Zalena leaned a little closer. "We don't know enough about genetics to know the difference between safe and dangerous genes. Your mother is working on that."

"Mom does." He shifted in the chair. She knew, as did Dr. Newell. Her training had to have taught her everything known about genetics.

"Ten minutes." One guard shifted position.

Jendal sighed. He'd be going to the mental illness hospital. To stay until they determined he was safe. The effects of the sleepy drugs slowed his thought patterns and response time. His mind began to swirl into sleepiness. "Who am I?"

"You are Jendal. Don't ever forget that." Uncle Henry touched his fingertip. "You will be home with us soon."

The guard pushed his stick against Jendal's back. "Hold out your hands." He handcuffed him in front of his family and Opal.

The guards led Jendal through the building and out several locked gates to a waiting van.

The day was dismal. The grays in the clouds mirrored his mood. His fear. A hospital as heavily guarded as the detention center he had spent the previous year in.

Upon arriving, he was ushered into a padded room with bean bags for chairs. One guard removed his handcuffs. The guards carried his trash bag with a change of clothes out of the room.

The door opened again.

Madella sauntered in with a smirk on her face and a thick ruler in her hand. "Nice to see you again. Hope you enjoyed the sunlight and fresh air. You may not see it again."

Jendal groaned.

Penny followed her. The girl who used to torment Opal. Her face radiated emotions. Too many negative ones for Jendal to follow.

He sank into one of the bean bag chairs. He tapped his right knee. A habit he had begun in the previous year, with nothing else to comfort him. Bunny was long gone. Owly was gone. His mother was gone. Even Opal, Aunt Zalena, Uncle Henry, and Tamela were gone. Knee tapping shouldn't comfort him, as he didn't want to be touched by anyone.

"Are you going to play with your hands again?" Penny laughed. "No one here does baby talk like that."

Madella snorted. "No baby hand talk. Only adult talk. You two will talk and visit while we plan your education schedule."

A groan formed deep inside himself. He tried to stop it from erupting. It came out more as a burp.

In the meantime, Penny chatted incessantly. He couldn't have snuck in a word if he had wanted to.

Madella poked him in the shoulder blade with the ruler. "Speak."

"I've nothing to say." His voice was dry. His mouth thick, cottony from the drugs he had been given.

She loomed over him. "We will start with please and thank you. You never did learn those words. Repeat after me."

He closed his eyes. If he closed them, he might be able to follow her furiously fast speech, and repeat the words before she said the next one.

Madella poked him again. "Eyes on mine. You aren't paying attention."

More pain. Eye pain. Blinding headaches if he looked at people's faces. Something Ms. Evelyn and Opal had discussed worked. Look at the tip of their nose. They wouldn't know the difference. And occasionally their ear. How he was supposed to hear with his eyes, he didn't know. Blinding colors and dizziness

didn't help. He only heard them if he turned his ear toward their mouth.

Jendal longed for time alone. At least at the detention center, he had been left alone. In isolation. With no one. Other than when he was taken to his trial. Sometimes, they had forgotten to feed him for so long, his stomach had growled. Even there he had no idea what time it was, or what day it was.

At the hospital, it was different. No more dull grays. Instead, the colors were brilliant. Painful neon greens and oranges for clothes. Walls were a blue so bright it burned. Tables a yellow that left a haze when he glanced at them. Even the chairs were painful, a tie-dyed mix of neon green and orange. On a carpet that shimmered a brilliant fresh blood red with dried darker spots scattered around the activity room.

Meals were duller than the colors. Foods were eaten with spoons. Meat precut. If it was real meat at all. Occasionally, they were allowed vegetables and meat that required a fork to eat. Those were the dangerous days. Penny grabbed the plastic forks she was given and stabbed at people until they ran. She even tried to chase him with a fork as she had done to Opal. He grabbed the plastic fork and crumpled it in his hand. After a few times, one that led to a hospitalization, they quit serving meals that required a fork to eat.

Most of the residents weren't that much different than he was. Smart. Sometimes too smart. Most had led rough lives. They had no one to go home to, if they had been allowed to go home. Which led to few visitors. None of them were allowed the privilege of visitors. Except Penny. She was allowed anything she wanted.

One day, he was alone in the activity room for his math lesson. Several years behind what he had practiced in the Alaska Homeschool Program. Madella wasn't there. It was a different assistant today. Someone new.

Jendal looked up from the long division he had finished. "May I know the date?"

The male teacher glanced at the two-way mirror on the wall and shook his head. However, his hand moved in a motion Jendal almost recognized.

He sighed and pulled out the history book. Multiple pages had been ripped out. He turned to the section about early colonialism. He read a few paragraphs and realized how out of touch with the original inhabitants the book's writers had been.

The male teacher walked over and studied his math problems. He underlined a few numbers with his pencil.

Jendal knew he had the correct answers. He glanced back at the page. The numbers. Today's date. He pulled the page over and drew a tiny check mark with his pencil, while he erased the underlines and added an answer to a problem the instructor had added at the bottom.

Time passed. More time than he realized. He wasn't allowed a calendar, so he didn't even know what day of the week it was. Kept locked in a cold grey room with one change of clothes. If he talked enough during his education times with Madella and Penny, he was allowed to be out with some of the other residents. Including Penny. Who tormented him.

With nothing to read, nothing to see, and nothing to do, he had no idea what he was supposed to talk about. By talking less and less, he was punished with more alone time. More peaceful quiet time in the cold grey room. Time to try to reach the soothing trees and peace he had never known. Except in bits and snatches in the yard at Uncle Henry and Aunt Zalena's home.

His memory of Leonard drifted closer and further away. He wanted to draw nearer to the memory of hope, laughter, and light. It hurt too much. To know he might never see sunlight again, or hear joyful laughter. He pushed the memories away. However, when he tapped his right knee as he drifted off to sleep, he almost smelt fresh air, saw trees, heard animals living in the safe forest of the world he had never known.

Chapter 23 - Galataria

Leonard - Age 16

Leonard walked across the Maryiana Genetica bridge on his regular quarter moon cycle test of strength and stability. It appeared strong. Moss had colonized much of the stone work railing. No trees or bushes grew. A little water trickled in the drain sections along the sides of the bridge. The incline from side to side had drained completely from the rain. No damage.

However, something felt off. Something he couldn't see. A sense he couldn't quite recognize told him something was wrong. Something he couldn't hear, see, touch, or smell.

He stopped after he stepped off the Genetica end of the bridge. He had built a small stone seating circle here. Inside it, the small chestnut tree grew. Its large container was buried in the ground. The tree's roots needed to be released soon. The tree was about as tall as he was. Leaves shimmered in the light breeze.

Leonard reached out to touch a leaf. It was almost perfect. The tree was a little thirsty. Even though rain had drifted through the night before. It had to be the container. Soon, he'd find a way to release the tree. If he could find a way to reach Jendal.

Somehow, Jendal seemed both closer, and further away at the same time. Leonard could easily slip the boundary between worlds to view through Jendal's eyes, and hear through Jendal's ears. What he saw and heard made little sense. Too much painful color. Too few natural sounds. All clashing with internal thoughts, feelings, and emotion.

During one unintended slippage, he had witnessed events he didn't think possible. Wars were studied. Atrocities known, they were rarely described in detail, to avoid opening Bearam's Vault of fear and evil. Less intense detail on them meant less likelihood someone would, or could, repeat those specific events. A hint of the loss of life was enough to prevent conflict in the current time. The name of Bearam still caused generations of Galatarians to quake with the memory of rivers of blood.

In that slippage, two sun cycles ago, he had faced Bearam. As himself, or as Jendal, he was unsure. He had felt the heat of the

moment. The emotions he had heard Jendal call fear and anger had washed over him. In those moments, he had protected Jendal. His hands, his arms, his mind had directed Jendal's body and saved him. There had been nothing he could do to save the three people on the ground. As he slipped to his knees on the slick floor, surrounded by broken bloody people, he felt Jendal think that at least Opal was safe.

Jendal should have been happy after that. Should have been revered for saving the people who ran down the hall and saw what had happened.

Instead, his twin, his brother, his connection to a world he didn't know had been locked in a grey room and separated from his friends and family. Including Opal, the light and joy of his life. Leonard had heard the racing thoughts of the trial. At least some of them, as they chased around inside Jendal's head. Somehow, they had blamed him when they should not have.

He could reach Jendal's body and make it act. Leonard could not reach his mind. Could not let him know he was there. Somehow, he had to tell Jendal he was trying to save him.

When Jendal had been forced back into Madella's presence, in the glaring place, Leonard had known. Almost immediately. Had Jendal heard him? Was the connection growing?

Ria feared his connection was too strong. Too dangerous.

Narona wanted to find a way to end the connection.

Leonard wanted to save his brother. To bring him to Galataria, and give him the life he deserved.

What he had seen a third-generation adult do to the young man had been beyond any known accepted discipline in Galataria's culture.

Which led to a few questions.

What levels of discipline did Galataria have? Were they different in other former nations, the ones that hadn't separated genders? He had never known anyone to need much more correction than to be told no, with an explanation. The memories of what could happen were too ingrained from infancy. What happened if someone were to continue dangerous behavior after being reminded not to do something wrong?

Leonard had never considered doing anything wrong. Rules and laws were in place to protect them all. They weren't intended to be

broken, or even bent without a thorough contemplation of the consequences.

Sure, everyone had misheard a rule once or twice. And even tried something a different way than the expected method. It wasn't the same. Those types of change lead to innovation, as long as they didn't hurt a living being.

And what happened to adults that hurt others? Toddlers sometimes did unintentionally. Depending on the situation, the consequences could be serious. None as serious as what he had seen in Jendal's world. He had never known anyone to be treated the way Jendal was. Nor had he seen Jendal do anything that warranted such treatment.

As that thought flitted through his mind, he remembered the time he pushed Jendal's leg forward to trip the third-generation adult who was attacking the young woman being chased by a fork bearing female with a disturbing smirk. Leonard groaned. Had this self-defense action brought about the damage to Jendal's life? The worsening of his circumstances?

He hadn't wanted it to. Self-defense was an expected reaction. The attacking female. Her actions should have brought her before the Matrilineal Council. Chasing another person with something like that was more serious than anything he had ever heard of happening on Galataria since soon after the Devolution War. The adult should have been removed. Removed to where? Did they have a place to remove damaged adults to on Galataria?

One of the worst punishments was removal from the Genetic Pairing database. That much he knew. Little more was mentioned by the trainers. That threat was enough for most people.

Ria knew.

Ria.

He had grown up with her. Know her since she was a toddler. In the last sun cycle, she had become secretive around him. She had stayed away once they had moved to Maryiana. She didn't want to hear his dream world excursions anymore. As if they were unsafe. She had tried to convince him stay out of that dream world.

Which he couldn't do. Sometimes, it took over when he was working. Or even resting. He could traverse to it when he wanted. Other times, it insisted on being his present.

These last few dreams devastated him. That young woman chaser had grown up, and now physically chased after Jendal. With whatever she found to attempt to attack him with.

While the rude Madella had laughed at them both. As if they were funny.

Jendal tried to open the doors to the rooms, and he couldn't. The knobs didn't turn. The rooms had no windows. Nor vents to allow fresh air in, and heat rise out in the summer. It had been impossible to determine what season it was.

Jendal had been grey. Dressed in grey, he blended in with the walls, floor, and blanket. There was no color. No animals. No projects to work on. A swirl of sameness, each thought and feeling blended into the next.

Although peace of mind and breathing time were needed, this wasn't the way. Not lost in a cloud with nothing. No sense of purpose or hope had been in Jendal's thoughts as they chased each far faster than the young woman he called Penny ever could. So fast that Leonard couldn't catch them.

He'd have to find Ria.

Leonard looked around the clearing so full of life. Trees, flowers, birds, squirrels, rabbits, and more. More than he knew the names and habits of lived here, both plants and animals. Genetica was a short walk away.

He stood up and crossed the bridge back to Maryiana. Ria was there. Training the trainers who planned to return to various villages, including one to Yellowwood.

Leonard went home to drop off some tools. He sat at his table to send a message to Ria.

Her reply said she'd meet him soon, after mid light.

He switched to the drawing program. It was a simple one that he used to roughly design projects on. The colors were vivid, and the skill level was lower. He could draw anything. This time he closed his eyes, and let his finger draw the designs on the charged tablet.

Ria knocked at his door.

He answered, still thinking about the building he had drawn.

"Let's go to the genetic center. We can talk in one of the glassed rooms." Ria's hands shook.

Leonard glanced at her. "Are you afraid of me?"

She didn't answer as she led the way.

Normally, villagers couldn't use the discussion rooms. The entire village of Maryiana was women, except for him. So they visited in public, or shared personal homes.

Narona would allow them to use the room.

Ria opened the door to the genetic center.

Leonard followed. He waved to the woman at the greeter desk. He knew her, though he couldn't remember her name.

She waved back and pointed to a small room beside Narona's office.

He nodded and shuffled to it.

Ria paused at Narona's office door. "I don't think she's here."

"She's in Genetica. Samples to collect."

Ria gulped before she opened the room. After sitting down, she covered her face with her hands.

Leonard opened the curtains before he closed the door. Anyone could see in. It was a curtesy since Ria was so upset. Since she had her face covered, he chose words over signs. "What is wrong?"

Ria placed her hands on the table. She composed herself before using signs to speak. "Concerned about Bearam's Vault."

"I'm not."

Ria shook her head. "You aren't. Is Jendal?" She reached to her pouch and pulled out a paper book.

Paper. Rare. From before the war. Some paper was made, for specific, sanctioned, uses. It took too many nearly lost renewable resources to produce.

Leonard took the book and turned to the page with the leaf sticking out. A prophecy book. One that said the Devolution War would happen again if the human population dipped below a certain number. He blinked. It had a few dozen sun cycles before. There had been a viral outbreak that couldn't be contained. Narona had mentioned it. "I haven't read of any unrest."

"It's there. Hidden. Spoken words. Nothing serious at this time. The first section of the vault has been opened. Fear."

He nodded. All the more reason to discuss what he wanted to with her. Soon, their hands flew through the words. Faster and faster until they tripped over each other as thoughts and concerns were passed from one to the other.

Mid light was soon replaced by late light. Power went off in the building. They had to leave. Unless they chose to use words. Signs could not be seen in the developing darkness. And words might be recorded or overheard.

"Til early light?" Leonard pushed the book back toward Ria.

"You take the book. Read it. Narona and I will talk first."

Leonard stepped out of the building. A gentle rain drizzled. Enough to dampen everything and bring hope of budding life.

They left the genetic center. The walk home was lighter. As if a wall between them had crashed down. There was still rubble to remove. Hopefully, they could use the rubble to build a stronger friendship than ever. They'd need the strongest friendship if Bearam's Vault was slipping open.

Chapter 24 - Earth

Jendal - Age 16

A key rattled in the hospital room door.

Jendal sat up. He had been in the other world. Safe. Listening to birds and imagining all kinds of beautiful creatures. Most he had never seen. Not even on the animal shows they had watched in school. That school before the alternative school. How long had it been since he had been in school? Had Opal gone to college now? Did she even remember him? All these thoughts and more flashed past in the second it took for the door to creak open.

No one rushed in. Voices down the hall were soft, and in the distance.

"Jendal?"

The voice was familiar, and yet distant. It was a male. Not Uncle Henry. Or the lawyer who had represented him.

The shadow of a figure stepped into the room. He held a finger to his lips and to the side. The sign that meant to play along. One he and his mother used. "I'm Dr. Newell. Do you remember me?"

"Not really." He made the subtle sign of understanding. His throat was so dry, it hurt to croak out the words.

An armed guard brought a chair in.

After the guard left, Dr. Newell sat down. "I've been concerned about you. We've been studying your genetics. You've had measurable genetic drift since you were born. Even your birth genetics did not match the expected ones."

"Thought you didn't have them."

"We did. No one had compared them." Dr. Newell's white coat shone bright against the dingy grey wall.

"Can my genetics be fixed?" Jendal leaned his back against the cold grey wall. The grey blanket covering his legs blended in with the walls and hard floor. No shade begin or end point. His mind twirled. He pulled it back to here and now.

"No need to fix them. They are healthy." Dr. Newell made a subtle sign that said his mother was fine.

"Why did you come?" Jendal wanted to ask about Opal. Was there any way to? He tapped a spot on the wall he had rubbed until it shone.

Dr. Newell glanced at the spot. Obviously unsure what, or who, he was referring to. "Are you willing to be part of a genetic study?" He tapped his knee to indicate safety.

"Do I have to see Madella anymore?"

He shook his head. "She has decided she can't help you. She thinks you can't learn above a kindergarten level since you rarely speak out loud." Dr. Newell tapped his knee.

Jendal pushed back at the bile in his throat. He had studied pre-astronaut level physics before the incident at the alternative school. It had been a dream. Astronauts made money. He and his mother would never have been hungry if he could have been an astronaut. Nor would Opal. She was often hungry. "What do I have to do?"

"Walk with me. We will go today. Right now, in fact." Dr. Newell held his hand in a straight line at waist level. That sign had three different meanings. Which one did he intend?

"I'll go. I sleep too much here." Jendal shook his feet. He had gained weight from the drugs hidden in his food. Too much weight. No muscle.

"You can wake up." Dr. Newell stood up and held his hand out a few inches from his body.

Jendal smiled. Safety. At last. He stood. His legs wavered under him. How long had it been since he last stood and walked? Or ran down a street?

There had been no argument about him leaving the locked hospital. No residents, or guards, were in any of the halls. No doors open. The armed guards allowed him to leave without a word, and a glance. No handcuffs. Nothing.

When they reached the last set of doors to open, Jendal breathed the air of freedom. Sunshine would burn his eyes after so long, who knew how long, in the dark with only grey lighting and surroundings.

The door opened.

The moon and stars in a dark sky greeted him. Old friends. His favorite constellations were cherished friends. Even when hidden

behind clouds. Their memory woke a light brighter than even the sunniest day.

Dr. Newell motioned Jendal to follow him to a small dark car.

The car left through another locked gate. A few miles down the road, Dr. Newell spoke. "We've followed your progress. We've worked to find a way to get you out. We found one."

"What is it?" Jendal tapped his right knee out of habit.

"A plane ride to a safe country. My lab and all of my assistants have moved to Europe."

"My mother?"

"She is there. As are your Uncle Henry, Aunt Zalena, and Tamela."

"Opal?" He hoped she was there.

"Yes. She too. Healthcare and college tuition were the driving factors in the move. And safety." Dr. Newell pulled into a small airport. "It will be a long trip. I have a set of clean and healthy clothes for you, and a place to take a shower. I'll stand guard outside if you want."

Jendal laughed. Nice clothes? Better than the tattered grey striped pajamas he had worn for too long. "What day is it?" He opened the car door.

Dr. Newell ushered him toward the building. "October 25."

"How old am I now?"

"Sixteen."

A year locked away in the hospital. A year and a half in the detention center before and after the trial. Depending on the way you counted. He had been locked away since the day after Opal's birthday, two years before. "I've been away too long."

"We believed the trip in the dark would be easiest on you. A lot more peaceful. Time to gradually return to the world."

"Is it really this easy?"

Dr. Newell shook his head. "No. We will take your passport photo before we leave. There is a timeline for when we agreed for you to be gone. So we can't go visit your home. Sorry."

"And if we don't meet it?" Jendal waited. Passport photos take a while. "Doesn't it take six months to receive a passport?"

Dr. Newell nodded. "Usually. However, we used an old photo, and agreed to have it updated. Should take an hour, no more, when we reach the city for the stopover."

"Sure it will be valid?"

"It will. Judge ordered it. We'll be there before they even open. No one else will be there." Dr. Newell gestured to the door.

Inside the building, Dr. Newell showed him to the small shower room. A fluffy towel, and nonscratchy flannel pants and shirts were stacked on a side table. Two colors. His old standby of grey, and one navy blue set.

He had had enough grey to last a lifetime. He chose the navy-blue set to wear.

After a warm shower, he felt more refreshed than he had in years. Jendal checked for bruises as he dried off. He knew there had been some. Perhaps many from Penny and her dangerous outbursts.

He understood why some people had outbursts there, she had been that way before. As a child. She never talked about herself, or why she had outbursts. Or what sent her to the facility. She hurt deep inside. And chose to hurt others, instead of allowing them to be friends.

At last he dressed in the warm navy blue sweat pants and sweat shirt. He opened the door.

Dr. Newell sat nearby reading.

"What do I do with the old clothes, towel, and extra outfit?"

Dr. Newell looked up at him. "Bring the extra outfit. There is a trash can for the hospital clothes, and a dirty towel bin under the sink." He closed his book.

"The plane will be here in about an hour. There was a slight delay. Do you want something to eat, or will it give you jitters while flying?"

Jendal smiled. Food hadn't even crossed his mind. He ate when given food, and had stilled his hunger pains so long, he didn't even feel them anymore. "I've never been on a plane before. I am hungry. What are my options?"

"Only snacks. Sandwiches and chips. There will be more options when we reach Europe. A real meal. Everyone is excited to see you. In small groups of course." Dr. Newell pointed toward a table with a fridge next to it.

On the table was a coffee pot, with flavored coffees to choose from and some tea bags. He chose a plain tea. In the fridge, he

looked though the selection. Two bologna sandwiches and a ham and cheese sandwich.

The door opened and a woman stuck her head in the door. "There is soup in microwaveable containers if you want. On the shelf above the microwave." She closed the door.

He picked up the ham and cheese sandwich and checked the soup supply. Four flavors that didn't sound appetizing. Steak and potato soup sounded good. He chose it. Soon he sat beside Dr. Newell eating a small meal. Better than he had been accustomed to at the hospital.

The sun peeked over the sea crest horizon. Peaceful. No sign of life out there. The sea should be full of living creatures, far under the cover of water. No waves were visible from the vibrating small air craft. It wasn't much. It had a few seats and some cargo space. Not that he needed much.

Jendal had one small bag with an outfit in it. Nothing brought from the hospital. Nothing he wanted to remember from there. He wanted to forget, if possible. Nightmares haunted him. Penny chasing him with knives instead of plastic forks had woken him up from a deep sleep many a night. To shiver and cower in the darkness, without even Owly or Bunny to keep him company. Only a tattered grey blanket.

Dr. Newell napped in one of the other seats nearby. He had been silent after they entered the plane. Several important pieces of boxed cargo were now strapped along the hold area behind the few seats.

Jendal tapped his right knee. His stress reliever since Owly and Bunny were no longer there to comfort him, through no fault of their own. Sleep would make the trip shorter. He had been confined so long, that only that small amount of exertion had exhausted him. He needed to tame the excitement of being free, and the fear and unrepressed joy of being with his mother after so many years.

Opal was where he was going. His face warmed at the thought. She was with his family. Hopefully, they had at least a few days to reconnect before they had to start working most of their waking hours to support themselves.

It was too much. Too many emotions swirled in his brain. He closed his eyes to prevent dizziness.

A tiny dot of calm appeared in the sea. The plane slowed and coasted toward the dot. The dot grew into a mass of greenery which slowly organized into trees. Except for a clearing in the center of the island.

"Dr. Newell." Jendal leaned closer to the man he barely knew. "Where are we going?"

Dr. Newell stretched and glanced out the window. "A small island scientific retreat. Lots of different science goes on there, mostly marine or astronomical."

"Astronomical?"

Dr. Newell yawned. "Out in the ocean, no lights. Perfect for star gazing."

Jendal looked out the window. Sure enough, there was a telescope building there. Or, at least part of a building. As the plane slowed for the runway, construction scaffolding appeared around the outer edge.

"You might want to meet the astronomers. They will be back in a day or two to oversee the rest of the work outside of the building, before the inside work will begins. Not much viewing for a few more months at least."

"I want to see it."

"You'll have the chance." Dr. Newell sat up as the plane landed with a jolt. "Not today."

"That's fine, I'll have to prepare."

"Mask on?"

"Hope I don't need it." Jendal unbuckled his seat belt. Excitement raced through him at the memory of his family. Excitement to see them again. Hope for a future. His stomach gurgled. Too much sensation.

"It'll be okay." Dr. Newell led the way.

When they reached the group of people waiting on him, Jendal realized he hadn't thanked the pilot. It was too late, as the plane lifted for takeoff to somewhere other than this hopeful oasis.

He hung back. After two and half years, he didn't recognize them. More years since he had seen his mother. They would have changed a great deal. Despite what Dr. Newell had said, he was unsure if his family truly welcomed him. True thoughts were often hidden by social niceties.

His mother stepped forward to hug him. Owly nestled in her arms. As they hugged, she passed Owly into his arms. Along with the tears that streaked down her face.

Aunt Zalena stood beside Uncle Henry. She held a squirming Tamela, now seven, from running forward.

Tamela pulled away from her parents and ran to him. She hugged him. Her arms reached above his waist, and almost a full circle. She had grown.

Opal walked up beside his mom and reached for his hand. "I missed you."

Piper danced around him, and jumped up on Jendal's legs.

Jendal reached down to pat the dog's head.

Chapter 25 - Galataria

Leonard - Age 17

Leonard sat on his bed as the sunlight drifted in over him. Two more men had moved into the village of Maryiana. Both a few sun cycles younger than him, and both had been raised like he had. In villages with, and by, women and sisters.

Most of the women of Maryiana were glad to have them here. The men lived and worked with them, and attended to legation duties there.

Some of the women watched them. Him particularly. They knew he was somehow different. Maybe because of his closeness with Ria and Narona. People thought it was unusual. A friendship between men and women hadn't been known for generations.

He'd begin his legation duties. A strange sensation. An unexpected, unnamable feeling and emotion he recognized from Jendal's world. Not quite the same, almost. Close enough his head swirled in the emotions as it had only done in Jendal's mind before. To think of having legated children of his own.

The choice was his to know if anyone chose him, or not, to legate a child. It wasn't required. He could be informed if, though not whom, a woman chose him. Unless the woman chose to tell him. It was his choice. However, he might be sad, or unhappy, if no woman chose to have him as a legator. It might be better not to know. Blaise had known about him. However, Leonard's unique circumstances may have played an important role in that decision, along with Blaise's community position.

Narona had informed him that a new program was beginning this sun cycle. All men who had been raised with women and girls would be tracked to determine if women chose them as legators, or preferred those legators who had been raised by men. Of course, the genetics were the main issue, and that study was an add on. If they decided the men weren't good enough based on how the men grew up as the only factor, it mattered. Both now, and in the future.

His walk to the genetic center was different. His feet faltered. Leonard almost turned back several times. Heat rose in his face. Perhaps he would wait to legate. Another moon cycle. Or two.

He wasn't there to visit Narona. The formerly friendly building now held his future in a way he didn't understand. It was no longer the place he visited with friends, as a friend. That friendship might end, based on his decisions, and theirs.

Leonard paused as the glistening building towered before him. What was it like for the men from Genetica who had never been here to walk up to this glistening gem in the forest?

The greeter welcomed him as she did every time she saw him.

This time, he walked to one of the conference rooms and waited his turn.

A few other young men he recognized from Genetica arrived. They joined him.

One of the men glanced at his friends and back at Leonard before speaking out loud. "You are one of the cherished ones, aren't you?"

A talkie. And one who wasn't the happiest about the change in status. "If you mean raised by my parenta, yes, I am." Spoken words exhausted Leonard.

The other men laughed. One smiled.

"It's okay. You're the bridge builder. Maybe in the future all of our legated children will be cherished." One man added a few signs after the words. "Vincent may be bumped."

Leonard lifted his hand and lightly tapped the table in understanding. They didn't need angry people becoming legators. How had those genes reasserted themselves? And in order for someone to say that here, in Maryiana, that potential legator had to have shown issues before now.

Narona and another woman from her staff walked in to give the presentation given before all men's first legations.

Leonard's face turned red. As he listened, he wondered about life, and the family process before the Devolution War. Little was discussed about it in training. Only that it led to problems, and was best forgotten.

Soon, it was over. The embarrassment of the event would last. His first legation was forever tainted by the young man who ridiculed him, and showed that bad people still existed in Galataria.

Ria waited for him at the library. This library held cherished paper books from before the wars. Paper books from all over Galataria. More than any local village had. There were multiple

charged tablet stations, some with full desks and workstations, others with comfortable couches. The charged tablet network here was more complex than the ones he had used before moving to Maryiana. Within the library walls, they could connect to virtually any other library on Galataria. It was a place to learn. A place to study. And a place to dream.

Her office was on the backside, overlooking a ravine filled with trees. Trees of all kinds. This part of Maryiana was a place his grandparenta had lived. A genetic nursery for trees almost lost in the wars. She had planted many of those trees when she was here in her first apprenticeship. Even younger than he was now. His favorite tree outside Ria's window was a walnut tree. One that had a unique growth pattern and nearly brushed the branches of the walnut trees surrounding it. As if framing the other trees protectively from the building and humans.

Much as he imagined his grandparenta protecting himself, his parenta, and siblings. Sometimes smothery, not always understanding them, and their unique ways of being part of the flow of life. She was after all, a talkie. Without a full understanding of silence, and deep, thorough, thought before doing anything.

Leonard pressed the buzzer on the door shelf.

When the door opened automatically, he walked in.

Ria peered out the window, not even looking up. The door wouldn't have opened if she hadn't seen his face and clicked the release.

He sat beside her on a soft chair the color of scrambled eggs and the texture of pressed wood.

Ria raised her hands to sign. Tears streamed down her face. "Not good. Narona will join us."

He nodded. Nothing left to say before Narona arrived. What more news could there be? His mind swirled through the emotions and words of the new legators he had met. Add that to the words and emotions from Jendal, and the feeling of overwhelm pushed him toward the ground. He slid off the chair with a thump.

Jendal's world was changing. Something was different. He was around new people. New sights, colors, textures. There had been a sound and feeling of immense vibrating power he had never known. He looked out of Jendal's eyes and saw the land far beneath him, racing past, much as the photos on the charged tablets of pre-war

society. The technology used for people to travel the world that way had been banned because of ecological damage.

A bird flew past the window and landed on a bench between the window and the walnut tree. It turned toward him and bounced its tiny blue head up and down. Peace began to return. Leonard pulled back to Galataria, and left Jendal alone in his too colorful, and too noisy world.

Narona arrived. She sat in front of him and Ria. Narona raised her hands to sign, and then shook her head. She waved to Ria and relaxed, or at least relaxed to a higher state of tension than normal.

Ria raised her hand to sign. "It's difficult. We don't know for sure. Jendal's world needs to be forgotten."

"How can I forget it?"

"I don't know. History is starting to repeat. Some men are becoming over assertive." Ria waved at Narona.

"We heard what was said at the Genetic Center." Narona's hand faltered. Her mix of signs and words were uneven.

"It wasn't nice. They are jealous."

"Jealousy leads to war. We can't have that." Ria's signs were agitated. Too fast and jittery to comprehend.

"It doesn't have to be. If it is only a few. Like Vincent." Leonard pulled himself tighter. His hand wavered. It was only one, wasn't it? He hadn't felt that feeling in Genetica, even though those other men had come from there.

"We hope." Ria signed. "We will have to determine what to do. We can't let it go on. We have to stop it before it becomes a problem. How? It hasn't been a problem in generations."

"What does the law do in this case? The Matrilineal Council has to have created rules for this." Leonard signed. His fear of the answer grew the longer Ria waited to respond.

Ria reached for a paper book. "We couldn't have the laws change, like they can on the charged tablets. The laws change based on both time that has passed, and the severity of the crime. However, there is a potential complication throw in."

Narona waved to take on the conversation. "That man may be the only one. And, he may also be a genetically switched person."

"Switched from Jendal's world?" Leonard's thoughts drifted for a moment. Maybe his brother wasn't the only one.

"Possibly. We don't know. We are checking. It'll take a half moon cycle." Narona stopped signing and glanced to Ria's right shoulder to hand the conversation back to her.

Ria place her finger on the book page and read aloud. "In the first generation, death. In the second generation, banishment. In the third generation, the law, the action, and the consequences must be reviewed and renewed. Bearam's Vault cannot be reopened."

"It's been five generations. Depending on where you start the count." Narona signed.

Ria placed the book on the table before signing. "This copy isn't clear to me on that. We will consult."

Leonard's thoughts swirled until they began to coalesce. "Could it be a good glitch, in some ways. Our world tried to pull in new genetics we need."

"And give them ones they need?" Ria nodded. "Possibly. Or might have been. Vincent should have been raised so that he wouldn't have this issue. Unless the genetics that crossed were dangerous. And we don't need them."

"We don't. Can we safely leave him loose in Genetica? He would lead others to dangerous thoughts." Narona glanced at Ria's face before she turned away.

"For now. It's all he knows. We will have an answer in a few light cycles. We will not allow this to become a safety problem." Ria peered at the book. "We have nowhere to banish him to and make sure he doesn't become a danger to himself, or others. And nowhere to keep him safe from others. Until we know, we wait."

"And hope a problem isn't festering in Genetica. Our primary genetics research center." Narona clenched her hands. The fear in her actions contrasted with the flat affect of Ria's. Ria's flat affect was obvious when her emotions were too strong to be visible.

"I haven't seen or heard any problems in my work with Blaise, or Clovis, in Genetica. I don't believe it is a wide spread problem. They don't like the 'cherished' as they call us."

Ria's jaw dropped. "You've heard them call you that in a non-friendly way and didn't report it?"

Leonard lowered his head. "I didn't realize they meant it that way. The talkies sometimes say odd things, and I didn't worry about what they said. Their words hurt in an odd way. I thought maybe

other men spoke like that to each other. I've not heard such words in Genetica. They ignore me there, since I don't try to talk to them."

Ria's signs shook. "We shouldn't have allowed you to go alone. Any other person would have been okay. Your connection to Jendal, and his world, has disguised what you should have recognized."

Leonard's connection to Jendal had been both a wonderful experience, and a way to experience emotions at levels he never could in Galataria. Feelings, thoughts, emotions, sights, sounds, so much of the lost and forbidden world, he had accessed without trying at first, and now, he couldn't stop visiting it. The mere thought of not visiting his brother made his head swim. "I'm sorry."

Narona touched his right shoulder. "Not your fault. At first, we wanted to know what you saw, and believed they were dreams. Then, you hoped you were helping him. And maybe us. We didn't recognize the signs."

Leonard leaned back and closed his eyes. It was true. He had begged to continue visiting that world. To help Jendal. And deep down to find a way to save Galataria. However, there were more reasons. Glimpses of the forbidden, and forgotten. As if to see if they could be brought back to Galataria. Perhaps in a way to save, rather than destroy the world he knew.

Chapter 26 - Earth

Jendal - Age 17

Waves crashed against the shore. Jendal poked at the loose sand in front of him. A crab skittered across the sand away from him. A beautiful place so full of life. A home like none he had ever known. Not even at the nice house with Uncle Henry and Aunt Zalena.

It was his one-year anniversary here. On this remote island. He didn't want to leave. Aunt Irma and Aunt Clare had left for the mainland a few weeks before to find a place to live for them and the family members leaving in the morning. Uncle Henry and Aunt Zalena were joining them with Tamela and Opal. They wanted to live and work on the mainland to give as many opportunities to Tamela as possible. Tamela was a talker, and the constant chatter sometimes made Jendal want to cover his ears and run to the ocean's edge for peace.

She tried to be a sweet girl. At age eight, she needed to be with others her own age, as he never had. He had been happier alone.

Opal was going with her. To help care for her. And to go to college to train to be a social worker. She had given up studying law, since that field meant being around angry people, and being yelled at. She wanted to help others like themselves, lost in the system that didn't understand their needs or desires.

Jendal shuffled his bare feet in the soft sand. He didn't want Opal to go. Nor did he want to go with her. He peered back at the observatory. The one he had helped build throughout the previous year. This was home. He had spent most of his time learning to build, learning to use the equipment, and occasionally catching up on his studies that had been abandoned by the hospital administrators, primarily Madella. He shivered at the memory of her, and what she had done to him. The nightmares would never go away.

A bell rang out across the island. Almost time for the party. His one year here party, and the going away party for those leaving in the morning. A busy, busy, talking, noisy, sensory nightmare. He'd endure it for those who mattered most. Especially Opal, who would

be as pained as he. They'd slip into a quieter corner to chat soon after the initial congrats and good luck speech was over.

Jendal smiled. They had spent many hours chatting and studying. Opal had helped him catch up on the education he had feared he'd never complete. He had continued in the Alaska Homeschool Program. She had finished months ago. He had almost caught up.

He stood up and turned to look at the observatory. A beautiful building. This telescope was not large enough to rival the major superobservatories. It was greater than many on university lands.

Opal stepped out of the trees and walked up to him. She didn't have to say any words. Her hand reached as if to take his before it dropped to her side, as always. Her way of comfortably saying walk with me, without the need for actual scratchy touch, so common among those they lived among.

The party was more subdued than expected. Even Tamela was silent. She sat at the meal table in the activity room of the aircraft hangar converted into a multi-level, multi-family Hanger Home. She tossed some dice in the air and ignored them when they rolled off onto the floor.

Opal tapped the pool table and walked over to the young girl.

Tamela shook her head. She mumbled something. Even in the unexpected silence, the words didn't echo as they normally would.

Opal waved him over.

Jendal breathed deeply before walking over. Tamela wasn't like the little girl he remembered. He had not reconnected to her in the previous year. Her constant chatter had driven him away. To the observatory, where the scientists rarely spoke unless necessary. They preferred written communication to signs. Which was fine with Jendal.

He sat down beside Tamela. His fingers formed the sign for hello.

A tear slipped down her cheek as she signed back. Tamela reached out and hugged him. "I'll miss my quiet bear. I have to go. It's for the best. For me. And you. Will you remember me?" She leaned back and observed his face.

Jendal wiped a tear off her cheek and smoothed the loose strands of hair back behind her ear. "I'll be here."

"You'll always be my brother." Tamela jumped up from her seat knocking it to the floor. She ran from the room. Such a messy child. She constantly needed someone to pick up after her.

"Why is she so upset? She is getting what she wants." His signs trembled as the door slammed. The vibration rang through him before the sound reached his ears.

"She wants you there with her. To look up to. To follow. As she did when she was a toddler." Opal signed back. "It won't be the same for her. She knows it will make you happy to have her gone and communicate by email instead of spoken."

"Don't make her go because of me."

"Not just you. She knows she has to. She wants to be a communicator between quiet people like us, and chatty people like her." Opal smiled. "Not sure if she will be successful."

"I don't think the world is ready for quiet people. Thought seems forgotten, and noisy action valued." Jendal looked away. It was complicated. Tamela's emotions were almost as complicated and conflicting as his own.

The outside door opened and the scientists walked in to join the party. They walked over to the food table before joining him and Opal at the eating table.

The lead scientist sat beside Jendal. While his name was Dr. Quillen Moorland, he preferred to be called Quilly, because of his prickly attitude of saying things with few, to no, excess filler words. "Okay?"

Jendal nodded. Quilly's conversation style worked good with him and Opal, less so with the family who liked spoken words more.

Fellow intern scientists, Wenda and Vivian, sat across from them.

Wenda signaled to him before speaking. "Ready for tonight? We will focus on the constellations."

Vivian attempted to sign. She used BSL, which was different from ASL, and more different from the dream world sign combination that Jendal used with his mother, and had taught the rest of the family. "Catalog photos?"

"Cataloguing." Jendal waited a moment to determine if they would say anything else. "I'm going to eat and spend a few moments with my mom."

They nodded. They understood him. Few words needed. Rarely spoken.

Opal signed that she wanted to check on Tamela.

He joined his mother and Dr. Newell at the other end of the table. They weren't speaking or signing when he walked over to them.

"Wish she didn't have to go." Jendal's signs faltered. Some emotion rambled around the edges of the others. A different one. One he didn't recognize. What was this unnamed emotion? His mind chased it around trying to catch a full glimpse of it.

His mother's hands moved almost out of view. "Tamela or Opal?"

He tried to catch that emotion to give it a face and a name. The emotion was multi-colored and flashed. It raced away, always out of reach. His fingers grazed the emotion he couldn't name. There was something vaguely familiar about it. Not connected to his mother or Dr. Newell. Closer connected to Uncle Henry and Aunt Zalena. Who were also leaving in the morning.

"Unsure. I'll think about it tonight."

His mother placed her hand over his. "Don't think too long. You'll find it easier if you don't. Don't forget your online exams in the morning. You need enough rest to do your best."

Her voice comforted him. As it always had. "Working rests me more than sleep."

She smiled. "Have a good night then."

He sat still as she and Dr. Newell left the activity room. His thoughts drifted onward and outward to the stars he longed to reach. Somewhere out there was the dreamworld friend, Leonard. The one who had kept him alert and aware all through the difficult years. The one who gave him a sense of peace and comfort, that even his own mother couldn't give. Somehow, he'd find him. Among the stars.

Quilly shut down his computer. "Almost daybreak. Enough work for one night."

Vivian nodded. "Time for breakfast dinner. Jendal?"

"No thanks. I can't." He wasn't hungry. His stomach had flipped for the last hour. Pain and discomfort. As bad as the pain when he had been in the hospital.

Vivian and Wenda glanced at each other and back to him. "We'll be here if you need us."

"I'm fine. I'll be there to see them off." Jendal turned his computer off. He turned out the lights and locked the door as he was the last to leave.

His feet lead the way. Before long, he was on the beach, peering out across to his former home. The country that had rejected him, Opal, and his family.

Opal touched his hand. "I don't want to go. I'd stay, if study online were an option."

He nodded. "Tamela needs you."

"I know. And I need you. If you ever want to go on to Europe. I'll be there. Or return for you."

"I'll be fine here. The people here understand me. Mom. Dr. Newell. They will make sure here is safe."

Opal waited. "Don't watch the sunset so many times. Follow me, and view the sunrise in a new place. Where we will be accepted."

"Are you sure?" Jendal turned to her. He wanted to hug her. "I've watched the sun set on so many dreams. So many hopes. My record will follow me everywhere I go, through no fault of my own. They will view me as dangerous. They don't know me the way you do."

"They will. With the right introductions. Let them meet the real you."

He shook his head. "I can't. I don't feel safe even thinking about it. I feel hot. Seem to float to the dream world. I don't even remember what happened."

Opal touched his fingertips. "I know. And telling you not to think about it will only make it worse. There is no right answer. I wish I could wipe the memory from you."

"If you could, would it happen again? Somewhere else? Somewhen else?" Jendal turned back to the ocean waves.

A gentle hum interrupted the tranquility of the island. A peace rarely disturbed by more than the natural sounds of nature.

"I have to go." Opal glanced back at their home. She waited on him.

He stood up to follow her back. To say goodbye to those who had taken care of him. He hugged Opal before they stepped out of the undergrowth. "Come back please."

She wiped away a tear and nodded.

Aunt Zalena and Uncle Henry waited to say goodbye.

As the plane coasted to a stop, Tamela ran out of Hanger Home and straight to him. She hugged him. "Don't forget me." She then ran to her mother and held on.

Opal breathed deeply and turned to look at him.

In a few minutes, all the noise and confusion was over. The plane loaded. And it took off, brushing the tree tops as it went.

Piper nosed Jendal's hand before running off to play in the trees.

Jendal sighed. He turned back to their home. His mother and Dr. Newell waited on him. As did the final exam for the Alaska Homeschool Program. On no sleep in two days, he had to take the exam, and hope to pass it. To graduate. The thing Dr. Grendal and Madella had promised he could never be able to do. Somehow, he would graduate.

Chapter 27 - Galataria

Leonard - Age 19

Outside Ria's office window the birds gathered. A larger bird pecked at a smaller one. The others around it circled and swooped, calling and calling.

Leonard closed his eyes. He should be able to understand the calls. He once had. As a toddler. Were they taunting the picked-on bird? Or calling hope and help to him or her?

Ria opened the door and entered the room with her charged tablet. "I've more news. The Matrilineal Council has decided. You must stop connecting with Jendal."

Leonard leaned forward. "The connection is too strong." The signs slipped from his fingers. Ria had to understand. She had to make them understand. The women on the council should feel his connection to Jendal, even if he did not speak before them.

Ria sat down and placed the charged tablet on the desk. "I'm sorry. Your parenta attended through video. She believed strongly that the connection must be severed because of the unrest in some of the men's villages."

"Why was she allowed to speak, when she has the same connection?" A bird squawk distracted Leonard. His hands faltered as he glanced back at the window.

Ria blinked before continuing. "It isn't right. Her connection has been severed. The council voted against the connection."

"I never had a chance to state my case." His signs flew faster and faster. His grandparenta would never have kept up.

Ria nodded. "I wish the laws were different. They will change in time."

"If you had the connection between worlds, would you have been allowed to state your case?"

She looked away. "Not certain. In this case, unlikely."

"I can't accept this response. They don't know everything they need to know."

Ria touched her charged tablet. "Leonard. We have to protect Galataria. The unrest is growing. Like nothing no living person has ever seen."

"Only Vincent made a rude comment." Tears tested his eyelids. His connection to his brother was unbreakable. If they told him he could no longer connect, and meant it, it might kill him. Leonard couldn't fight the draw to hear and see through Jendal's eyes. He had tried.

Ria shook her head. "It's been many. All over Galataria. It's scaring the women. They have considered a reversion to the laws of our grandparentas."

Leonard pulled into himself. A reversion meant fences, not bridges. Men closed off in their villages. No longer raised by women. No freedom to travel without a guard. Even for him. He shivered. He had never had a guard. "New genes. We need them. We can obtain them from Jendal's world."

"That's the problem. They are being chosen randomly. Narona has led the team to test the men who are acting outside the legal parameters. All of them have genes from another time, another place. It may be Jendal's world. Or another."

"I didn't realize she was testing them."

"That's why she has been gone so much. It's been a difficult time for her. She had hoped." Ria turned away.

"Hoped?"

"We both wanted a return to an ancestral family structure. It won't happen for us."

"Like the stories from Jendal's world?"

"Not exactly. A more equal family structure. Men need to grow up knowing their parentas and their legators. Especially now. With the disturbances. The council voted against that. Someday. We hope. There will be new council members in a few sun cycles."

"Can't we send the problem men somewhere safe?" Leonard's emotions slipped. Much as Jendal's did, as they chased after the conversation and ran into dozens of directions trying to comprehend all the signs Ria was using, and the ones she wasn't. She was hiding something.

Ria shook her head. "No. It isn't a few troubled men. There are scared women in many villages. The are no damaged people in the gender joined villages. The Matrilineal Council doesn't believe sending the damaged people to live alone is wise. It may make them more dangerous, and we can't watch them. The alternative is worse. They will be removed from the gene selection process."

"I have to help him. He doesn't deserve." Leonard's signs faltered. What hadn't Jendal deserved? His life? His hidden time? The lack of hope and family? Better yet, what had he deserved? Everything he had never had. Justice demanded it. Justice demanded he find a way to save Jendal.

"Leonard." Ria spoke his name.

When he turned to Ria, her signs stuttered through her words. "We have to protect Galataria. And you. We need you. We've lost you to Jendal. You are lost between worlds. We need you here. Not locked away in Genetica."

A tear slipped out of her eye. She leaned her head on the desk. "It won't always be this way. Council elections will change the council."

There was a knock at the door.

Ria pushed the button to open it.

The door slid back into the wall.

Perrin trembled at the door. "In." His word was so soft Leonard barely heard it.

Ria nodded.

Perrin stepped into the room. Perrin was a signer who lived in Genetica. A sun cycle or two younger than Leonard.

The door slid shut behind him.

Ria lifted her hand to sign. "Sit. We all sign here."

Perrin breathed deep and sat beside Leonard. He looked out the window to calm and center himself.

Leonard glanced out too. The birds were gone. A rabbit had nestled against the tree and looked into the window. A ray of sunshine illuminated the bunny.

Perrin turned to Ria. His hand faltered. The signs slipped away before forming words.

She signaled for him to take his time.

He began the story. "The person who caused the problem two sun cycles ago, Vincent, is stirring up trouble." Perrin glanced back at the window.

Leonard looked out. Normal nature outside. Perrin must be centering himself.

Perrin lifted a hand to sign. "Vincent said he wants to hurt people. I've never heard anyone say that. He talks so much, I have no idea what is real, and what is imagination."

Ria glanced at Leonard. "Specifics please?"

Perrin closed his eyes before continuing with the information. The things Perrin said that Vincent wanted to do mirrored the time before the wars in the ways men had treated women, and even each other. He wanted men to take over the Matrilineal Council, and dissolve it. To find, and re-initiate nation boundaries. And to prevent the cherished ones from having any say so in the world he wanted to build.

Apparently, he had developed a secret chat group on the charged tablets to connect to others who believed as he did. There was more he related. Specifics. Including destroying much of what had been rebuilt after the Devolution War. The culture, the plants, the animals.

He gasped. Leonard had no idea that the damage was so great in his own community. "How do you know about the chat group? How many are in it?"

Perrin glanced at Ria before continuing. "He invited me. I think about fifty all over Galataria. I hope most are like me, observing what is going on. There have been several private conversations that have been alluded to."

It was worse than Leonard had seen or heard in Jendal's world.

Leonard wasn't sure what to do. He understood what Ria and Narona wanted, and why. He also understood, deep down, in a way he couldn't explain, what the troubled man in Genetica wanted. Because of his connection with Jendal, he understood those nameless emotions. The emotions that didn't occur on Galataria anymore. Or hadn't occurred. The behaviors no one wanted. No one would admit to, even if they had them. The problems genetics and behavior had tamed out of the human population.

Whether for good, or ill, he was unsure.

Perrin finished sharing the information. He waited for a response.

Ria touched her charged tablet to turn it on. "I'll have to report this to the Matrilineal Council. They have had more meetings in the last two sun cycles than the previous ten sun cycles. This needs to be convened now, no later than next early light. They may want your words. Will you speak them, or write them?"

Perrin's eyes widened. "Write please."

Ria nodded. "Wait here a moment while I message them."

Perrin adjusted on the chair and stared out the window. He lifted a hand to sign. "I didn't want to be part of it. I hope I am not damaged. Clovis wanted me to stay alert for Vincent's comments. Is he opening Bearam's Vault?"

"I don't know." Leonard leaned forward and placed his head in his hands. He could neither speak, nor sign.

The sky clouded over and raindrops began to fall as they waited. Even Ria became restless.

The charged tablet dinged. Ria read the words silently. Then aloud. "At early light we will meet here for the council meeting. Narona will join us."

Ria turned off the tablet to sign. "Do you want to go back to Genetica?"

Perrin shook his head.

A loud crack of thunder resounded through the room.

"He may stay with me tonight. What is your skill?" Leonard observed Perrin's face. The younger man had a strength behind his calm exterior, common to signers on Galataria. A strength and confidence missing from Jendal, and those around his brother. Even the people he connected with who would have been signers if they had grown up on Galataria.

Perrin's face showed little, to no emotion. The emotion showed in his shoulders and hands. "I want to be a planter. To grow vegetables. To help feed everyone. I don't want to have to stay in Genetica. They don't have much room for growers, since most growers are women and live in Maryiana."

Ria leaned forward to sign as the darkness crept into the room. "We will find you a place."

They arrived before early light to prepare to listen to the Matrilineal Council meeting.

Ria already had her charged tablet connected to a larger screen, one big enough to make it appear the meeting occurred in the same room. Although most of the council was scattered all over the world, there was very little lag time in communication thanks to the satellites in Dinah. Or at least no more lag time than signers normally needed.

The four of them sat in a circle.

Ria placed a name tag tablet in front of each of them. "It'll be okay. They can see all of us at once. The camera is set up that way."

"I hope so. How can we do what is best for everyone? Is it even possible?" Perrin glanced out the window.

Clouds whispered away. Dampness was the only sign of the storm from the night before.

"It can't be right for everyone." Narona peered at her tablet. "What we are seeing in the genetics stream is concerning. All these extra genes coming from another world, or worlds, and they include the violent genes we moved away from."

"The genes should have been repressed if they were raised properly." Ria moved a few more objects to make room for the camera.

"Not necessarily." Narona walked over to the window. "They can be strong."

"There was change in our birth sun cycle." Leonard tapped his right knee as he had known Jendal to do. Somehow, it didn't bring the same comfort to him as it did to Jendal.

"The changes are part of it. Some of the men feel like they are missing having a parenta." Perrin wrung his hands.

"Missing feelings seems to be the main issue." Leonard pulled his charged tablet toward him to draw until the meeting began. What would it bring? He had never considered speaking before the Matrilineal Council before. He hadn't known of any men ever doing so.

Chapter 28 - Earth

Jendal - Age 19

Ocean waves pounded the beach. Stormy weather wasn't far off. Jendal stood in the spray from the waves. The cold, salty, sandy spray invigorated him. He licked his lips. The spray tasted like blood. As he remembered from the many bloody lips Penny had given him at the hospital. He touched a scar on his arm. This scar had been from her. It was an arc from a knife she had managed to hide and attack him with. Madella laughed at her attack on him. Even egged it on.

Now though, he waited for someone safer. Opal would be home soon. Home for the wedding he didn't want to attend. Opal didn't seem bothered by the wedding. His mother had reminded him the connection benefited him and her.

What Opal didn't understand was, once his mother and Dr. Newell married, they planned to leave the island. Both of their chances to work and have an income were far better in Europe. They missed people. Or, at least Dr. Newel did. Emerging Lineages had been rebuilt there, and he had to travel back and forth to the clinic frequently.

His mother didn't seem to like people as much as Dr. Newell. She could do her job without seeing many clients. Her work in the background at the clinic meant she didn't have to be near people if she didn't want to.

Opal had been gone two years. She had maintained computer contact.

Jendal had taken a few online courses. He planned to stay here and work with the astronomers. No reason to ever leave the island. There was nothing off the island he needed. Except Opal.

Tamela, now ten, didn't need him anymore. She was a chatty with dozens of friends, with Uncle Henry and Aunt Zalena to take care of her. She'd always have a place here, if she wanted it. Although she talked about coming back for a visit, she had no interest in staying with so few people her own age. And no one who enjoyed talking. This was the peaceful island. A place of contemplation.

His phone buzzed. He pulled it out. Opal would be there soon. And surprisingly, Aunt Zalena, Uncle Henry, and Tamela were coming for the wedding. Jendal closed his phone and hurried off to inform his mother. She'd give him the job of making sure their old rooms were ready for them.

Jendal paused before opening the door to Hanger Home. The last few years with his mother had been wonderful. His mother wasn't the same as when he had been young. She didn't have to protect him here. She would leave with Dr. Newell. He was a nice enough person. Who would treat his mother good. It wasn't the same. Dr. Newell had only been active in his life a few years.

The man his mother was about to marry wasn't the father figure Uncle Henry had been. Jendal couldn't remember life without Uncle Henry. Uncle Henry had always been there, until two years ago. Even then, an email was all he needed to reach him.

Email replaced signing as his primary communication with his mother. Unless, he went with them. He shook his head. Too many people. Too much noise. Too much color. There was no place for him out there in the talking world. Madella had seen to that. He was better off here. Where he knew everyone, and everyone knew him. A place with trees, and life.

It was similar to the dreamworld. The dreamworld had been darker recently. Leonard was facing a threat, a fear. Something Jendal couldn't quite place. It didn't make sense. Even if, in some ways, it did. Fear of people. Or being around too many. Or some specifically. A fear of not being able to be himself, and having to be someone else. To wear a mask around others.

The door opened. Dr. Newell paused and waited until Jendal looked at him. "Thought you'd be back soon. Are you okay with this marriage?"

"It's not for me to decide. I want my mother to be happy."

Dr. Newell nodded. "I think she will be."

"Will you tell her Uncle Henry and Aunt Zalena are coming?"

"I will. Where are you going?"

"I have to take care of something at the observatory. I forgot." Jendal turned and ran. He ran past the observatory entrance. He went to the bench in the flowering bushes his mother had cultivated near an abandoned small home. A quiet place. A place to think.

Before long they'd all be here. All the people he knew. When they left, he'd have silence for the rest of his life if he wanted. He wanted this alone time now. He needed it. Even though he knew them all, even the thought of all that sound and motion overwhelmed Jendal.

He hadn't recovered from the years in the hospital. The continued efforts of Madella to take away everything that mattered to him to force him to speak and act in ways that weren't natural to him, or Opal. It hadn't worked. He couldn't force his brain to change.

Hear and comprehend the words before they were spoken. Move in the painful ways expected. Sit with legs dangling off a chair, instead of with legs crossed properly on a floor. At least sitting on the floor, a decent amount of personal space was maintained. Unlike dangling on a chair, where knees and shoulders touched. He shuddered. Such unnecessary touch. One of Madella's favorite punishments was to force Penny to sit beside him on a double chair, with dangled legs, her shoulders, knees, and ankles touching his.

One of the worst punishments was the chattering. Constant talking. Recognize and do the trivial talk that didn't matter, and no one paid attention to. It wasn't possible to function when the talking continued. After a few words, he couldn't hear anymore. His ears seemed to shut down as he tried to process the spoken words. Then she poked him with a ruler and smacked his hands with it. Which didn't help. He regressed further into himself.

And all the little things he did to help him focus, and not slip into the unconscious world where he didn't have to experience the constant stream of noise, sights, and confusion were also not allowed. She had tried to force him to stop tapping his right knee when other people were around. Other small movements had not been allowed either. She claimed they made people nervous. It wasn't possible to change those innate qualities of himself and make himself the person Madella wanted him to be.

Madella wanted him to be a chatterbox. To talk constantly, without actually listening. To know what the "correct" response was to the useless chatter. To recognize when people meant the opposite of what they vocalized. She wanted him to move around people without looking out for their safety, or his own.

Games. All the games she had forced them to play. With words, toys, and board games. Any sign of thinking before acting, or asking for clarification, was smacked out of them with a ruler to the hands. Or more of their few items taken away from them. He had never been able to act on command to earn any items back.

She had even taken most of his clothes away when she caught him organizing them by style and color. She had yelled at him that as a boy, he was supposed to throw them in a crumpled pile on the floor. She hadn't even allowed Penny, her favorite, to organize anything.

His brain couldn't work that way. His brain was wired to think things through thoroughly before acting. To hear all the words before forming a response. To look before moving when other people were around.

Not natural. How could inattention to details not be natural to people? Perhaps the lack of attention to details was natural to people like Tamela.

Tamela. Would he even be able to communicate with her at the speed she was known to speak? It had been at double, or triple, his comprehension speed, even when she slowed enough to vocally communicate two years ago. She had spent much of the last few years with others her age who talked, didn't write, didn't text, and certainly didn't think things through.

Had his mother truly thought this marriage through? She didn't communicate in the styles other people expected. She had a better grasp on the spoken styles than he did.

A twig snapped.

He looked up.

His mother stood a few feet away. She didn't try to talk. Simply sat on the bench beside him, much as she had when he had been young. Really young. Something he almost remembered. At a park. Where the hushed calm had been broken up by incessant beeping.

He nodded his thanks. Glad she wanted to spend a few quiet moments with him.

She held her hand up to sign. "Here if you need me."

He raised his hand to sign. Signs didn't seem to have enough information in them at times. Much better than spoken words. Clearer. They flowed with his thoughts "Sure you want to go back there? Around people?"

She nodded. "Yes. You are an adult now, and need to succeed here."

"Madella said I would never succeed if I didn't learn what she tried to teach me. I couldn't learn it."

His mother closed her eyes. "She didn't want to teach you. She wanted to re-make you in her image. I'm glad you didn't learn it."

"How?"

His mother leaned forward to be sure no one was in sight. "Court ordered abuse was still abuse. If I had done those training techniques to you by my choice, I'd rightfully be in prison."

"And I wouldn't have missed you. I would have feared you, like I fear Madella."

She reached over to touch his hand. "That's why I had to leave. To try to stop it. To do all I could to protect you. It never felt it was enough."

"I know. Don't leave because of the past."

She leaned back on the bench. "I'm not. I'm going for me. If this doesn't work out for you, or me, I will be back."

"I want you to be happy."

"I will be happy. I need you to be happy also."

"As long as no one tries to change me." Jendal smiled.

"No one should. Unless you do something that is a danger to you, or someone else."

Jendal glanced at the observatory. The sound of the incoming plane's engines whispered into hearing range over the regular island noises. "He doesn't want to leave because of me? Because I have the radio on in my room all the time when inside?"

His mother shook her head. "No. He recommended you not need it as often. When he realized how much it helps you concentrate inside, he understands. Even if it annoys him sometimes, when he wants silence to think."

"I come here for quiet."

"I know. Let's go meet the plane." His mother stood up and led the way to the landing strip.

Jendal followed. His radio had bothered Dr. Newell. As much as the lack of sound bothered him. He only needed the radio when inside among other people. Outside, the sounds of nature were better. Sometimes, when what one person needed clashed with

what the other needed, it made life difficult. There had to be a better way than them having to leave.

The plane slowed to a stop.

The first person off was Opal. She ran right to him.

Piper danced around her legs.

Somehow, together, they'd find a way to manage in the noisy, active world of overwhelming sights, sounds, and confusion of the next few days. And decide on a future. Either here, or on the European mainland.

Chapter 29 - Galataria

Leonard - Age 20

The bridge between Maryiana and Genetica continued to strengthen as the concrete settled on the supports salvaged from the ancient city. Moss grew and covered the spaces where the concrete had been exposed to the elements. This should make it survive longer than a human lifetime.

Leonard paused at the center of the bridge. No new trees grew there. The chestnut tree he had transplanted now grew in the center of the seating area he had built. He had not found a way to reach Jendal, and the roots had to be unbound. Those roots didn't connect the worlds. Perhaps, the roots would reach between worlds. In the future.

Gilbertan waited for him at the seating area near the entrance to Genetica. He had found something unexpected while clearing a space to prepare for a new house he was building.

Leonard stopped at the tree. Somehow, he knew once he passed it, there was no going back. His life would be changed forever, as would the lives of everyone on Galataria. He touched the leaves of the chestnut. A bird sang to him from a branch. The song was familiar, like a blanket from infancy that he could cling to as he stepped from the past to the present, and future.

He picked up a fallen leaf to carry with him on the path he had designed to connect Maryiana to Genetica. Soon, the gateway loomed ahead. The stone columns glistened in the sunshine. No moss grew to protect the stone from elemental wear and tear. Rain could destroy this stone work in another generation. In fact, there were crumbles at the base that had to be swept away regularly to make it safe for the solar carts to pass beneath.

He stepped on through the archway.

Gilbertan sat at the table. Something nestled in his hand.

"Hi." Leonard spoke aloud to alert his brother before appearing beside him.

Gilbertan glanced up before signing. "Didn't hear you."

"What did you find?" Leonard sat beside his brother. The young man had grown up. Like Leonard, he had apprenticed as a builder.

However, he was a traveling builder of homes. New homes were needed as the population recovered and grew. He had been sent to Maryiana and Genetica to help build a new home in each before going to another paired village.

"Here. See what I found." Gilbertan handed him the object he held in his palm.

Leonard looked at it. Cold. Metallic. With rust on the edges. "A dropped piece from the bridge building?"

Gilbertan shook his head. "Buried about four inches deep. With lots of concrete. Plenty more. I broke a piece off."

"Why was the concrete buried?" Leonard glanced in the direction of the bridge. His heart beat faster as he sensed the danger.

"Come and see." Gilbertan stood up. He glanced at the village of Genetica, with its odd buildings, the long work building, and back at the entrance.

Leonard followed the glances. He felt a sudden chill. It reminded him of someplace Jendal had been. A memory he feared.

They reached the place where Gilbertan had been working. He had removed a few small saplings, offspring of the trees their grandparenta had cultivated here when she was Gilbertan's age. The trees had been removed gently, to be replanted in an open area.

The ground had been cleared of the forest ground cover and a few stones stacked up beyond the house foundation. On the outside, holes showed where the saplings had been removed.

Gilbertan walked up to the largest one. He pointed in the hole.

Leonard walked over to the hole. He sat down on the side and looked down. A cracked disk of concrete was buried more than a hand's width deep in the hole. It was as big around as two people standing together. In the middle of the concrete was more of the rusted metal. A piece nestled under the dirt that was almost as big around as his leg. He shivered. It felt wrong.

He touched the concrete. It was cold and bad. As if from the time of the Devolution War. How he knew that, he was unsure. He felt around the edge. Leonard grabbed the digging tool to determine how deep it was buried.

"This isn't the first one I found."

Leonard looked up.

Gilbertan sat beside him. "I found one in Maryiana. About the same size. Both on the outside edge of the village. Beyond where anyone has been known to live. In places that earlier generations avoided."

"How deep?" Leonard tried to think of a logical answer for what this was, and why one existed in both villages. According to Ria and Narona, there had once been walls around men's villages. Walls were stone, weren't they? Where had all the stone gone? He closed his eyes. Stone walls weren't in sight, nor was there any trace of the missing stones among the trees, or the homes in either village.

"Deep. I found the one in Maryiana, and I tried to find the depth. It is deeper than my arm is long. I left the ground to stabilize, and started preparing this foundation. And found the same thing."

Leonard worked with the tool. The forest ground was tough. Much tougher to dig through than near the bridge. They could damage more tree roots here. After a hand's width, he stopped. He couldn't determine the depth without further damaging the environment. There was no reason to dig deeper to build homes, since they were built above ground. "What do you think?"

"I think we need to ask Perrin to go visit Ria with us."

"Perrin?"

"Last mid light, he helped me remove the trees. When he saw the roots of the tree around this piece of concrete, he ran to the gateway and stopped, staring at it. Then he hurried on to the bridge and sat there to calm down before returning to help me."

It was almost mid light now. The best time to be digging in the current weather and temperature conditions. "I'll go find Perrin." Leonard turned away.

Gilbertan touched his arm. "He seemed afraid."

Leonard nodded. "With good reason." There were secrets the trainers hadn't taught them. Perhaps they meant well. Perhaps they were secrets men should not know. Or knowledge the Matrilineal Council wanted forgotten by all in another generation or two. However, with what he had seen, heard from Narona and Ria's words, and known in Jendal's world, fear gripped his stomach and caused it to jump.

The Matrilineal Council might have intended everyone to forget. Or they may have been holding the knowledge in case they needed it again.

Leonard knocked on Perrin's door.

"Come in." Perrin's voice warbled.

Leonard stepped in.

Perrin had a pack on his bed, and a few clothes scattered around. He sat down. "I figured you or Gilbertan would be here."

"You can't leave."

Perrin looked up at him. "I have to. Vincent may have figured out what is going on. And there have been whispers."

Leonard breathed deeply. "We can't ignore the whispers. They will lead to worse problems." Pictures of Jendal's world flashed before his mind.

"You don't know Vincent like I do. He grew up here. Like I did." Perrin hid his face in hands.

Leonard touched Perrin's shoulder. His signs wavered. "Vincent is a talkie. We can't talk here. Tell me what you know."

Perrin's signs rattled on into even more detail than before about Vincent and his plans.

"Is all of this new?"

"Some. I have remembered more."

"We have to talk to Ria." Leonard's hands shook. Ria would be upset.

"Early light." Perrin turned back to his pack. "I'll be ready to go if need be afterwards."

"Perrin, there is nowhere to go to get away from Vincent."

Perrin nodded as he looked at the wall.

"You may stay with me in Maryiana." It was a good idea. That way Perrin wouldn't leave before early light.

He smiled. "Thanks." He finished placing his clothes in the bag.

Perrin took a bowl out of the food preparation area. "I have fresh nuts we can eat tonight."

Leonard held his hand out for the bowl. "I have some venison. It'll be a good meal. Let me carry your pack." Better to not have Vincent believe Perrin was leaving.

Perrin nodded.

The walk back through the village of Genetica was calm. They both felt as if they were being watched. Crossing the bridge in silence should have been relaxing. It wasn't. Leonard brushed his hand across the spot where the chestnut tree had once grown. He sensed the shimmer of connection with Jendal's world.

When they reached Maryiana and went inside his home, he felt a breath of relief. They had listened the entire walk for sounds of people following them.

Gilbertan arrived behind them carrying some fresh vegetables to add to the meal. They maintained silence, signing, listening to nature, and through the silence for any signs of trouble.

The following early light the three men arrived at Ria's office. Leonard knocked.

The door slid open. Ria sat on the couch looking out the window.

The view outside was perfect. A deer, a few rabbits, and some birds peacefully eating.

Leonard walked around the couch to sit beside her.

Tears had tracked down her face.

Gilbertan and Perrin sat nearby.

The door slid shut.

Ria glanced at his shoulder. "Our world seemed so perfect. So peaceful. And it's ruined. Some are blaming you. I understand why."

"What did I do?"

"It's your connection to Jendal. Before it, none was known. Galataria was safe."

"My parenta had it first. And no, Galataria wasn't safe, you know that."

She nodded. "Tell me more about your find."

Gilbertan described the concrete he had found. "It felt bad. Cold. Scary. Scarred."

Ria turned to Perrin. "What did you see?"

He looked out at the serene scene. "I can't describe as pictures so much. Fear. Light and dark. Loud sounds. Strange walls that could be seen through. Fingers gripped through the grey walls." He leaned forward and closed his eyes.

Leonard glanced at Ria. She knew something. Of that he was sure.

She glanced at the scene outside. Then back at them. "I'm going to tell you something I found out this early light. It was kept from even the historians. A few in the Matrilineal Council even knew about it. They don't want you to know. I think you need to."

She picked up her charged tablet. "I can access the records on here. Leonard, your connection to the other world is our connection. Explain the pictures. Most of it is forgotten knowledge."

Leonard took the tablet. At the top of the page was a locked symbol. Only people with special clearance from the Matrilineal Council were allowed to view these pages. Generally, secrets were not allowed. However, even early trainees knew that some knowledge was held from them, to prevent them from repeating mistakes of the past.

He scrolled through the pages of The After War Journal. Villages were behind almost visible fences. Men not allowed to roam free. At all. Until the adult generations of the time were no longer living. The male children had been sent to special villages with no adult males, the opposite of now, to be raised by women in groups.

Eventually, the fences had been taken down and repurposed into homes and buildings. Or destroyed in some places. Especially the one around Genetica. That was the men's village that had rioted. They had killed each other until none were left.

The ghosts of that time, that place, so similar to the world Jendal lived in had returned to haunt them, and the younger men being raised in Genetica.

Chapter 30 - Earth

Jendal - Age 20

Machines beeped around Jendal as they spit out documents and information about the space junk circling in their telescope's field of vision. Their current paid project was to detect and track all of the various space junk in the atmosphere within a certain radius. He had received the email to work on the project a few hours ago.

Space junk. Going to space would be great, if space didn't remain littered with all the bits and rocket parts that fell off as the ships entered, and returned from space. There had to be a better way. Early space travel had not considered the consequences of the debris that fell off and didn't immediately burn up in the atmosphere.

"Vivian."

She glanced up at him.

"Did they tell any of you why they want the study?" Jendal signed before he studied the numbers of objects hurtling within a specific radius of Earth. More than he had expected for some of the sizes.

"Several reasons. To compare numbers, trajectories, velocities, size, and effects from previous studies. And to give them an easier naming system. One that doesn't become too long. At over 500,000 pieces of debris, the random strings of letters and numbers begin to look alike."

"I thought most were already numbered and tracked." Jendal set the model on his computer to run the simulation of the speed of a few of the larger particles on his most recent scan. The dizzying speed, up to 17,500 mph, was so much like his mind, especially when his emotions overwhelmed him. It mesmerized him.

"Most. However, there were several unaccounted ones found recently. One data station lost power and all of their backups. So all that information was lost. It may have been an undetected hit from space debris that veered too close to the uploading satellite."

"No backups anywhere else?" Jendal glanced at her. There should have been backups in every station.

"They were being updated when it crashed." Vivian switched screens to view pictures of the dots of space debris half the size of a grain of rice.

"So even if they were numbered, and trajectories known, all of the information was scrambled. Or lost." Wenda flipped to the list of debris the size of a pea. "The one we believe is Pea2096 may have been part of Brick637 that shattered last month, with changed trajectories and velocities."

"All the bits we had saved separately couldn't have put it quite back together then." Jendal shook his head.

"The question is, was it sabotage?" Vivian turned to another page to compare the dots.

"Maybe some country, wanting to test something secret, or an unauthorized, unknown, launch of something at the wrong time. Some countries don't have all the data, and may have launched something a few seconds too soon, or too late." Wenda glanced at him.

"Or a wealthy individual without access to the information. The uploading satellite was damaged too?" Jendal walked over to the coffee pot.

"Yes. It was hit by something. Perhaps a pea sized piece of debris, a meteorite, or something else. Or that other satellite." Vivian held her hand up to count the spots on the screen. After she counted and wrote the number down, she signed. "It'll be a while before we know the complete consequences of the damage to the uploading satellite. Its onboard systems may be able to reset. Or not."

Jendal clicked a few buttons. Compared to the previous study, five of the softball sized objects he had found had not been catalogued before. He gave them a catalog value and updated the database. The new rules said to update every five objects, or every five minutes. Whichever happened first. "Five new objects. In the area we had data on."

Vivian nodded. "Not surprised. The satellite that burnt up on reentry last week may have exploded first."

He glanced at her. "That wouldn't be good. Does anyone know what it added to the atmosphere?" He had been studying for final exams instead of working for the last few weeks.

"Can't be anything good." Vivian turned to her work. "The atmosphere composite data is changing, if the initial studies were accurate. With unknown effects."

"Effects on the ozone layer, satellites, and future space travel." Jendal turned to another simulation. This time one of smaller particles from the orbital tracking satellite. Some almost microscopic. Smaller particles were becoming more frequent. Even small, micro particles could do serious damage to the space station, or any space travel. The dream of going to Mars may have to be postponed until after the debris fields cleared. Reaching for the stars had become little more than a dream. Until they had a way to collect and remove the debris.

Early astronauts had dumped lots of things overboard. Some unintentionally. Others, intentionally, including bodily waste. Jendal laughed as he imagined a cartoon spaceship, complete with an impractical, and unlikely, glass windshield, flying through a field of early space flight astronaut urine.

There was little study on intentionally removing the debris or chemicals from the atmosphere, or the long-term effect to Earth to leave them there. Many were known to affect the ozone layer, and needed removal. How, and where, at the speeds they moved was the question. How do you collect something moving at over 17,000 miles per hour without destroying the collector and adding to the debris? Somehow, space programs had to figure it out. If astronauts could dock a shuttle to the space station, they could figure out how to strain the debris out of the atmosphere. Or direct it away as new shuttles launched.

Perhaps a giant magnet in a lower atmosphere that tugged at metals, before it propelled them to burn up as they sped through the atmosphere. A good start to determine if it had been researched. However, some separated into dangerous gasses, or the magnet might carry them deeper into the atmosphere. It wasn't as simple as the space faring science fiction shows made it seem. At least not currently. There weren't any shields to bounce the debris off of. For now.

"Here's something interesting." Vivian leaned back from her screen.

Jendal glanced over at it. A particle that appeared to be folded had been scanned by one of the higher satellites it had passed

three days before. The name and number showed that it had been located in the debris field of an early launch mission, one from twenty years ago. The decaying orbit was so slow, it wouldn't burn up for a long time.

"Folded metal?"

"Possibly. Looks like a door hinge with screw holes in it."

"The sun would reflect off it. It might contribute to global warming, although only a small amount." Jendal glanced back at his screen. All of the satellites and their contents affected the atmosphere in some way. Some good, some bad. Adding the planet's pollutants to the atmosphere couldn't be a good thing.

The debris in geosynchronous orbit were the ones most likely to affect climate. And the most difficult to collect. Low Earth orbit and medium Earth orbit objects eventually degraded and ended up in geosynchronous orbit. Jendal pulled up the photos of the folded metal bits Vivian had found. They looked like door hinges. Perhaps hinges that had separated from an early satellite or rocket.

The door to the office area opened. Opal walked in. She carried a tray with three plates off food on it over to him and sat down.

Vivian picked up one plate.

Jendal reached for the fullest plate.

Opal smiled. She took a bite of the hamburger casserole. "Any star gazing tonight?"

He swallowed. "It will be clear. We can look at a few stars while all the reports are comparing data."

"You don't have to name and number everything yourself?" Her fork was inches from her mouth.

"We don't want to both label the same one, and end up with one object having two or more names." Jendal laughed.

Vivian put her plate down. "Go on you two. You need some time with each other."

After they finished eating, Jendal picked up the tray of empty dishes.

Opal led the way to the door. She opened it for them to go out.

They walked to the nearby picnic table and placed the tray in the middle. The stars were beautiful.

Jendal sat with his back to the observatory to view more of the open starry sky. "Do you want to go back?"

Opal sat beside him. "Back?"

"To the mainland."

She shook her head. "No. Nothing for me there. You and Piper are both here. I don't fit in on the mainland at all."

He nodded. They didn't. Neither of them would be comfortable in the sardine like atmosphere of most cities. Perhaps in farmland country, where they only saw people a few times a month. Farming in large scale wasn't something either of them had any interest in. Gardening for their own family was more than enough. "Now that you are back to stay, what will you do?"

She looked at him. "Take care of people. Of all of you. You work so much in there."

He smiled. It was easy work. More leisure. If they didn't need the money the projects brought, he'd continue to do the work. For fun. The concern was, if they needed the money as the island group, would they need a higher income to support Opal too? The island family financial situation wasn't everything they needed to survive.

"You need someone to do the cooking and cleaning. I can do all of that."

"You could do that on the mainland, and be paid."

"Then, I'd be miserable. And all my money would go to food and a place to stay. Not life."

Life. He nodded. Life like his dream friend. Leonard. In his dreamworld, Leonard had never mentioned money, bills, worries. He lived and built beautiful, functional stonework. Building walls to protect food, and bridges between villages. No big towns. Places where people lived full lives. They spent time, most of each day, with the people and animals that mattered to them.

Jendal slipped partially into the dreamworld. Where Leonard lived. It was a valued place. A place where people, and animals mattered. He had worked to bring some of that dreamworld here. Become friends with the native species of plants and animals. Helped trap and remove invasive species.

Opal touched his hand. "I can plant a garden."

"Good. I can help harvest, if you teach me. You enjoyed studying biology."

"Yes. I always did good in it." She leaned closer.

"Maybe you will find a grant to help remove more invasive species here. And the island south of us."

"If you will help me. Writing grant proposals is difficult."

"I'll help. I'll even help remove them."

"The most difficult part of dealing with invasive species." Opal pointed to a shooting star. It may have been a piece of space debris burning up as it entered the atmosphere. "How do we actually know what is native here, and if none of the native species are here now, can they thrive here again? Has it changed too much for them to survive? At what point do invasive species become the native species?"

Jendal grabbed his head. It was too much to think about. Any species that moved outside its birth area could be considered invasive. However, that was also how they survived. By moving, spreading out, and not dying off from over population or inbreeding.

At some point in the distant past, plants and animals had invaded land from the sea. They had moved across the land, spread out, and formed colonies. As they moved, they developed predator and prey relationships, to keep them in check. Some islands had even been known to switch the relationships, as prey became predator in a unique environment.

Jendal touched her hand. "It's all a laboratory. If we go out into space, are we invading it?"

Opal didn't answer. They listened to the nightlife of their small island without speaking or signing. Of all the island invaders, humans had perhaps changed this environment the most.

Chapter 31 - Galataria

Leonard - Age 23

The chestnut tree reached for the sky. Limbs swayed gently in the breeze. Birds nested among the budding leaves.

Leonard sat curled up on the bench. Soon, he would move to another community to the west to build more bridges across the swiftest river on the continent. There, the villages had been built with the women living east of the river, and the men to the west. Orlena and Nally had been two of the open villages allowed by the Matrilineal Council. For generations, their genetic clinic legated to all the clinics between the river and the mountain ranges that split the continent into uneven thirds.

Blaise walked down the solar cart path. He carried a small wrapped object. He sat beside Leonard. His legs dangled off the bench to the ground.

Leonard smiled. He shifted his legs on the wide bench. His back straightened as he tucked them together. The difference between himself and his legator was far greater than the differences between him and Narona or Ria. It always would be.

"Good luck on your journey." Blaise pushed the wrapped object toward him.

"You've given me so much already. I don't need anything. I can't take much with me in the solar cart."

"Unwrap it." Blaise leaned back to look up at the tree. "Such a beautiful being. Even if my ancestors didn't appreciate it."

"How can you be sure?" Leonard unwrapped the bundle. It was a small wood carving with a list of names and dates.

"I'm not. Not really. I am sure some further back than those lost and damaged men must have valued them. They gave them life, hope, heat, clothes, once. As they do now." Blaise touched a leaf on the tree that was almost out of reach. "A dream. To keep us all alive."

"Dreams. They confuse me. What are the names and dates?"

"A man in the village you are going to, Ethen gave it to me. He can tell you its history better than me."

Leonard traced the cut names and dates. "Ethen. His name is at the bottom."

"Yes. He was my trainer. He is over one hundred sun cycles old. The story is important, and must be spoken only, never written."

"Never written?" Leonard's heart began to race. The Matrilineal Council wouldn't approve. "Are there many spoken only stories?"

"No. They would not be allowed. They are passed down to a few individuals. They may be lost in the future. I hadn't intended to share it. However, I believe you, and only you, need to know."

"Did Ethen tell others?"

"Only those holding the names are allowed to know." Blaise leaned forward. "Your connection. The information Narona and Ria have given you, and you have passed on to me, tells me we need the story remembered, to find the other part of ourselves. To understand what happened to your parenta, and to you."

"I'll ask his story." Leonard wrapped the piece of wooden names back up. Little larger than his palm.

"Your chestnut tree is not like the others in the forest. Like you." Blaise stood up. "Time for me to go."

Leonard nodded. It was time to return to Maryiana, and share out the additional supplies he wouldn't be taking with him. Perrin was taking over his home, and anything left, in the next early light.

The trip to Orlena was long. Bridge building supplies needed to be placed in the solar cart so that he would be ready to leave at early light.

As the sun rose, Leonard plodded to where the solar cart was filled with everything he had to take with him. It wasn't just his equipment. He had several items, including genetic center donations, to drop off at villages along the way.

The solar cart was golden yellow with black and white stripes down the sides, to make it visible no matter the weather or terrain. His hands shook as he touched the door. He had ridden in a few, as a toddler. Riding was different from running one. So many things could go wrong.

Normally, Leonard would never have the chance. Women were supposed to run them. Each knew all the intricacies of their own cart. In this case, it was a long-distance solar cart, and the runner had died. There were no other runners in Maryiana who had time to

run it to Orlena. When he reached Misoula, the new runner would take over. It was a twenty light cycle run to reach her. Almost a whole moon cycle. It might be a whole moon cycle if he ran into bad weather, or unmaintained paths.

He didn't want to open the door. It meant the loss of the life he had known. Leonard was breaking a major taboo, even though he knew men had run this cart from Genetica to Maryiana a few times since the runner died.

He would be leaving his friends behind. Narona and Ria planned to stay in Maryiana. They had to continue working in their apprenticeships. Perrin, and his brother, whom he had begun to know, intended to stay. Along with his legator, Blaise. Something only a few people knew.

Leonard opened the door. The cart was packed with essentials, both that he needed when he arrived in Orlena, and food to eat on the trip. Some of the equipment he was carrying from the genetic clinic was too sensitive to send by sea during storm season. Orlena needed the equipment storm season ended.

Leonard glanced around the village of Maryiana. Usually, the runner had people there to say goodbye and hand last small packages to her. No one was there to see him off. Not even any talkies.

He sat down in the cart. Leonard peered at the dials and knobs. A local cart runner had shown him how to work them. And he could hook up his charged tablet and ask questions from the new runner at Misoula, if he had any issues. He turned the cart on.

Ria ran toward him from behind the home she shared with Narona. "Wait."

He waited until she reached him.

"Stay safe. We won't be able to contact you about anything important."

"I understand." He knew what topics she meant. Those couldn't cross the charged tablets. There had already been too much research done. The Matrilineal Council would be observing them. "Watch my chestnut tree grow."

"I will." She turned and walked on toward her office.

He smiled as he pulled away from the village he had lived in for several sun cycles. Ria had two children now, and Narona's second child was due soon. They hadn't said who the legator was, he had

hoped at least one of the children had been legated by him. That was a strange feeling and thought. One to explore on the trip.

Plenty of time to think about all he had learned. His first stop was a small village that he should reach about late light. After he reached the village, the track tenders would check with him to determine if any of the trails needed tending. A common occurrence during storm season.

It was early in the storm season. Flowers bloomed. Birds sang and swooped at the solar cart. Tree branches hovered out of reach along the trails. There were a few smaller trails leading off to single settlements, where a few women lived, not even a whole village. These retreats were where scientists had worked to rebuild the environment. Women with their pack animals messaged to meet him, if they needed supplies. None had been marked, until about the fifteenth light cycle of his journey. He would pick up their supplies a few villages before he reached them.

The first few light cycles went as expected. The villages closer to Genetica had seen men, so he wasn't an anomaly. There were even a few trainee men among the population. The oldest males he saw appeared to be ten sun cycles old.

By the fifth light cycle, young men and boys were becoming rarer. The doctors who picked up the supplies Narona had sent for them were surprised to see him running the cart.

The village he arrived at during the eighth light cycle didn't even send a doctor out. They sent out their village elder to greet him. She didn't invite him to her home, as the previous doctors had.

After she collected the supplies for her village, she cradled them in her arms. "There is an empty house, about to be torn down, outside the village. The roof isn't in good condition. You may stay there til early light. There is water and food waiting for you."

"Thank you." He understood. In some of the smaller villages, the idea of men among the women still stirred fear. After over a hundred sun cycles. The unnamed fear throve in these deeper communities. Leonard couldn't stay to diminish it. That would make the situation worse. He glanced around the village before he started the solar cart and went on to the indicated tumble-down house.

On the fifteenth light cycle, he reached the village where he planned to pick up supplies for one of the scientific settlements

further down. This meant that he was closer to Orlena, two more light cycles away. Across the river from there, a men's village thrived, similar to Genetica.

Two men walked out to meet him. A dozen or so women waited at the stop point. Children ran to meet him. Leonard smiled. Even though he didn't know these people, it almost felt as friendly as Maryiana before he even stopped the solar cart.

The babble of so many voices overwhelmed him as he stepped out of the cart. Leonard's breathing hastened. His eyes closed from the shock of sound. Signs were so much easier. One person at a time communicated, not a dozen at once.

One of the women held up her hand and smiled at him. "One at a time."

The children stepped back. Everything calmed down.

Leonard breathed deeply.

The woman signed instead of speaking. "Welcome."

He handed out the packages at her direction.

The children wondered off. With older ones leading some of the youngest.

Two men stood in the background. They watched, without speaking. After everything had been parceled out, they stepped forward.

The taller man introduced himself. "We tend to talk more than sign. In fact, we can't see signs well enough with the movement to understand them. We tried." They both grinned.

"I understand. My grandparenta was the same."

The taller man turned and began walking to the end of the village. "You'll be staying with us tonight. We have venison and vegetables. If you don't eat meat, there are a few here who don't, and they will provide other options."

"Venison is perfect."

The other man spoke up. "We live on the edge of the forest here. Nice and quiet."

The night of talk, although tiring, gave Leonard the opportunity to learn more about the region. The men informed him the runner who was supposed to take over the solar cart was fishing in Orlena, and planned to meet him there. The late light conversation brought back memories of his many vocal conversations with Blaise, his legator.

Early light streamed into the village. The crowd appeared larger than the night before, as villagers helped place the parcels for the scientists carefully in amongst his own packages.

He waved to them all as he left the village. There was a lot to think about. New ideas and hopes that the men had shared.

He arrived at the split off point and waited. It wasn't long before the two women arrived with a horse and cart to collect their packages.

They spoke in sign only. Which made it all go much faster. And easier. They both laughed when he signed if they stayed alone for the peace and tranquility. "Yes. We have two other women with us. Quiet helps us work."

In two more light cycles, he arrived at Orlena. It was the largest village he had ever been to. Instead of one path, there were two going in each direction. He knew the river was beyond the village. Out of sight with all the people and homes.

He found the parcel station and stopped. Two smaller, local carts were nearby. He grinned. Finally, time to give up his responsibilities. Once he dropped off his supplies and was directed to the indicated house that he hoped to make a home.

A scholarly generation man stepped up to the platform. One older even than Blaise. He raised his hand and spoke. "Welcome. I am Ethen."

Chapter 32 - Earth

Jendal - Age 23

Jendal closed down his research computer. So much to learn, to do, more than the multiple lifetimes of his coworkers could ever complete. If every person on Earth studied the universe, they couldn't capture a single moment in time, let alone the trajectory of all of the stars, planets, asteroids, comets, and other objects in the universe.

Something was out of sync. Previous trajectories had predicted a certain course of the asteroids near the field of Earth's gravity. Somehow, two small ones that should have entered the atmosphere and burned up over the Atlantic Ocean had bounced off. Two larger ones that should have veered toward the sun, had instead become small satellites of Earth, and been added to the orbital debris naming system.

The message for Quilly needed some thought to be prepared for the next nightshift. The former lead astronomer had moved on to run a larger array with more money, coworkers, and computers. Although he was missed, he did like to be more surrounded by people than the three astronomers who remained on the island. At least ten to twelve people, instead of five or six.

Jendal hadn't found an answer as to the unexpected course changes. Nor had Vivian or Wenda. It was off. Other near Earth objects were not following their anticipated tracks. Perhaps if he made a great discovery, the world would understand him, and accept him. Under an assumed name for safety, of course.

Opal and baby Krill waited in their apartment in the transformed aircraft Hanger Home. At six months old, baby Krill had already learned their daily schedules, and accommodated them. Most of the time. One of the shyer island cats, Trickle, had adopted her, and stayed with her as much as possible. They didn't have to worry about snakes or venomous bugs with Trickle there to protect Krill. Not that they left her alone for long.

As he walked outside, he watched the sunrise over the edge of the tree line. Beautiful. Peaceful. Home. Almost as wonderful as the dream world, and his dream friend Leonard. Except that he didn't

want to visit Leonard's world anymore. It wasn't as relaxing or safe as it used to be. He sensed the strife in his friend's world. As if the strife in Jendal's earlier years had leaked across the boundary to Leonard's world. As if he relived the pain and fear of Jendal's own earlier years instead of the former calm and comfort of Leonard's world. Jendal didn't want to relive it, so he tended to push the memory of Leonard, and his once tranquil world away. To not dream of it.

Opal stood outside the door to their apartment. The one that had once belonged to Uncle Henry and Aunt Zalena. It was the largest single dwelling in their converted aircraft hanger home, though walls between dwellings could be taken down if a few more rooms were needed. Opal wiped her face.

Her waiting on him outside didn't bode well. Jendal hurried up to her. "What's wrong?"

She looked at the floor. "My parents again. Why did we ever tell them?"

Jendal closed his eyes. Her parents had said they should never marry. That Opal should never marry or have children because she was too different. Too quiet and not a part of their jet set society. It wouldn't have mattered who she wanted to marry; they were against any relationship for her. They had despised him, since he had spent time in the juvenile court system. He touched her shoulder. "They aren't here."

She looked up at his eyes, before she moved her glance to his shoulder. "They have threatened to come and take Krill away. They say I can't be a good mother here, alone, with no other children for her to grow up with."

"That's not true." Jendal wanted to pull her close, though that was not what she wanted. Or even himself. Touch was too personal at this time. Too painful. To comfort her, as his own mother, Aunt Zalena, and Uncle Henry had comforted him years ago. "She will have virtual friends. Tamela will happily bring some of the young friends she works with to visit. Online is better."

A tear slipped out onto Opal's cheek. "They won't listen. They believe since we don't abandon her in a daycare with dozens of other children her age for ten hours a day, she'll end up like me, and unable to function in the crowded, noisy, stinky city, and a

painful city job. We don't even know her likes or dislikes. We can't help others understand her if we don't know her ourselves."

"A city job? We don't want to live in an unhealthy place, or such an unhealthy life. She won't either. Or, if she does, we will let her. Tamela will help her. Krill will be fine. We will find a way for our daughter to spend time in a healthy way with people her age. In a way she wants." His hand clasped hers. There were only adults on the island. Himself, Opal, Wenda, and Vivian. No other children. A few people visited from the mainland when shipped supplies arrived. Opal enjoyed seeing them, as long as there were the two or three people she knew by name. And they stayed an hour or less.

With so few people, and never any strife, there had been no need to even draw up a set of rules or laws to live by. Everyone lived happily together. The only time there had been any concern was when they had visitors who weren't considered family.

"What if my parents come here?" Her eyes glanced at his eyes, before down at the floor.

Jendal pulled away. The emotions were too strong. He wanted to protect her. And Krill.

Other emotions, toward her parents, surfaced. And they weren't nice. They hadn't wanted her to move to the island with his family. At the time, though, they didn't want her where they lived either. They didn't have time for calm living.

Her mother had never sat still for more than half a minute. Her dad worked and played all of his waking hours. The staff they employed to run their household, and care for their children, had constantly shoed Opal out of the way, trying to make her more active than she wanted to be. They had even taken books out of her hands and forced her outside.

Opal had made her own decision to move to the island. At the age of sixteen. Her parents hadn't minded then. Why the sudden change of heart?

There were so many more options for connection these days, most virtually. No need to be face to face with people who weren't an important part of their lives. No need for unwanted touch, or words, from people they didn't know. His brain cycled. Too fast. Too many thoughts and emotions. His hands found the wall to focus back on the present.

"They can't take her, or you away."

"They said they can."

"No. Krill is a citizen of Denmark, not the United States. She has no passport."

Opal looked up at him. "What if they try?"

"We will contact Uncle Henry and Dr. Newell to verify all passenger rosters for incoming planes or ships. We will make it impossible for them to arrive here." At least through documented channels. He tried to hide a growing fear. They were jet setters. With their own private jet. And more money than most people need in several lifetimes. Not a penny of which had come to Opal since she moved to the island. Not even birthday presents.

"I hope so." Opal opened the unlocked door to the apartment.

Jendal followed. Perhaps, it was time to buy a lock to protect them. Something they hadn't worried about before. Should it be on their apartment? Or the whole Hanger Home? He knew it might not be enough. However, he had suspected it might happen. Even Opal had when they married a year ago. Feared it.

He had formulated plans to protect the three of them. If only they were able to shield the island from unwanted communication or visitors. It wasn't that easy.

Krill was asleep in her crib with Trickle beside her keeping her warm.

Opal pulled the prepared meal out of the warm oven for them to eat.

Jendal stood over the crib and petted the cat. Their protector. The protector of a child he hadn't anticipated having. He wanted her life to be as carefree and happy as Leonard's had been in their growing up years. This island gave her that opportunity. A peaceful place. Not a bustling city, where you could never rest, or close your eyes out of fear of being trampled or attacked.

Opal sat at the table. "It's ready."

He joined her. "It'll be fine."

Opal placed her spoon on the napkin. "Are you sure? What about medical care? We all run risks. Even your mother is concerned about medical care. For Krill, and all of us. If a storm brews up, no one can be flown in."

"We aren't taking care of the airstrip. No time, and it is too crumbly for most planes anyway." Jendal chewed a bite of steak.

"We may need a few more people here. Not many. On the other side of the airstrip is the abandoned cottage. We will have it retrofitted, and a family live there who will take care of medical and educational needs."

Opal smiled. "Maybe bring a few orphans here. Ones that who will enjoy life on an island."

"That's an option. The warmth and humidity levels here are good for certain medical conditions, or at least Dr. Newell says so." He sipped some sweet tea. Almost as sweet as Opal's smile.

"That would be nice. Maybe it will make my parents happy. I'll email them with the news. Hopefully, they will leave us alone."

"They should. I'll email mom and Dr. Newell as soon as we finish eating."

An hour later, he was finishing his email to Dr. Newell when Opal sighed.

"They want to see their granddaughter in person. And hold her. We don't allow anyone to hold her. Not even Wenda or Vivian." Opal glanced up at him.

He chuckled. "She won't allow anyone else hold her. Not even my mother. They didn't answer the invite to our wedding, why do they want to see our daughter?"

"That's what I am afraid of. I don't want my father near her. Nor my brother. I don't want them back in my life."

"Short of sending them fake death certificates, what can we do?" Jendal hit the send button to Dr. Newell. His plea had included a few words they had agreed meant this was a serious situation and needed immediate attention, without alerting his mother to the full severity of the situation. She tended to worry about him more than he wanted her to.

"I don't know." Opal's whole body shook in fear.

Jendal sighed. He needed sleep to think. To plan. Instead, he walked into their bedroom to bring out the blue weighted blanket to wrap Opal in. It calmed her, more than anyone could. It comforted her. Gave her a space to feel safe. "Want me to read the exchange?"

She nodded before her emotions shut down.

He guided her to the couch to rest.

Jendal returned to look at the email exchange. As he sifted through the last several in the email chain, lines jumped out at him. Ones that reminded him of Penny. The person who had tormented Opal as a girl, and him as a young adult. He didn't know the full extent of the issues of Opal's growing up. He knew enough. Her family could not be allowed to visit.

They had no legal options on the island. No need for a police presence, or anything like that. Somehow, they had to disappear off of her parent's radar. Her emails could be traced, and they'd find them, even if they didn't have an exact location. Once they located the island, it was too easy to find them.

Somehow, Jendal had to find a way to protect them. As he had protected her many times before. Even though he had failed to protect Ms. Evelyn from the school shooter. He would protect Opal and Krill.

His email dinged. A response had arrived from Dr. Newell. He and Uncle Henry planned to arrive in the early afternoon with the midweek supply boat. A few hours away. Enough time for a short nap.

Chapter 33 - Galataria

Leonard - Age 23

Nearly a full moon cycle to Orlena. And the first person to greet Leonard was the last person Blaise had mentioned. Ethen. Ethen had been waiting on him. He had opened the solar cart door. And held his hand out to him. As if he knew him.

The entire path filled with people. People of all ages. Men and women. It was the largest crowd he had ever seen.

Ethen held his hand up. "Give him a moment. A silent moon cycle, and all the chatter will be too much. I'll help with the parcels he has brought for you."

A few women lined up to receive items. They spoke their names and Leonard handed the parcels out. There were only a few to go out.

"That's all there is." The words sounded strange. Spoken had always sounded strange. Here though, or perhaps because his words had been used less on the trip than normal, they sounded further away. "Everything else is the tools I need for the bridge."

Ethen leaned closer. "We'll have a parade to the house you'll be staying in, and you may unload there."

Leonard blinked. "Wouldn't the runner for Orlena take over?"

"She's out on the boats collecting food for the feast."

Leonard gulped. A feast. Crowds of people he didn't know.

Ethen held up his hand and waved to the crowd of several dozen people. They formed a loose line several people wide and led the way toward the river. They sang a song he didn't recognize. Since they sang at different speeds and different times, he couldn't catch the words.

He followed the line slowly.

Ethen stayed ahead of him. At his age, he managed well, even as he swayed from side to side using a cane with his right hand to stabilize him, somewhat. His own great grandparenta had not been as able to walk at Ethen's age, even with the best medical care.

They arrived at a small house on the edge of the town. The crowd circled the tiny house before they paraded down to the riverbank, and beyond.

Ethen sat down on a bench by the door. His left hand lifted to his chest. "Too much excitement." The words struggled from his lips.

Leonard left the solar cart and walked over to him. He relaxed on the ground to relax his legs from almost a moon of dangling to run the solar cart. "Do you need a doctor?"

His next several sentences were punctuated with raspy breaths. "No. Rest. I coulda used my solar chair. I wanted to lead the party one more time."

Leonard hadn't spent much time with the scholarly generation, other than Blaise. Perhaps he needed to adjust that in his next training. He waited calmly. The questions he had mulled over during the long run from Maryiana evaporated as the man in front of him struggled to breath. This was not the time, or the place.

"The party is half over. Or, a third."

"What party?"

"Welcoming you. The rest went to greet the fishers. The real fun begins tonight." Ethen leaned forward.

Leonard gulped. "Are they all talkies?"

"Pretty much. Don't worry. Most won't realize if you are there or not. Go ahead and unload. I'll sit here and catch my breath."

Leonard stood up and walked to the door. "Will I be sharing with anyone else?"

Ethen glanced his way. "If you want. You can bring my solar chair out for me, and then it's all yours."

"Was this your place?"

Ethen glanced at the door, then away to the river. "Yes. Long ago. I live in town. At the Scholarly Home. I do my work there. Miss the river. I come out here to watch it sometimes." His hands rested on his knees.

Leonard pushed the door open. Inside was bright enough from the doors and windows, with walls covered in decorations of all kinds he hadn't seen before. Ropes and solar ship objects he was afraid to touch. Near the kitchen area was the solar chair. Leonard checked it. It was more solid than a regular meal chair, and almost as comfortable as a resting chair. It had padded arms and controls. How did it work? He walked back outside.

Ethen continued to observe the river.

"I don't know how to run it."

Ethen looked up at him. "I'll be in to get it and show you how. Go ahead and unload."

Leonard returned to the solar cart. The place he had lived for nearly a moon cycle. He'd be giving it up. Thankfully. It wasn't a place to live. He carried one bag of tools in and looked at the solar chair. Inside, in the dark, how did the solar chair maintain a charge?

It didn't take long to unload or stack his tools and equipment along the walls. He could have travelled here by solar ship, if he hadn't had valuable genetic center material to trade with the town of Orlena. Something not trustworthy in the storm season. There were a few solar ship travels between now and the end of storm season. Even with charged tablets, storms blew up with little notice. Short trips between close towns occurred when the weather was clear.

Ethen hobbled into the home and to his chair. He sighed as he sank down into the deep cushions. "Wish it wasn't this way."

Leonard glanced at him as he arranged his toolbox between the bed and the wall.

"Wish we could talk. Blaise told me about you."

"I wish we could too." Leonard adjusted the cover one more time and walked over to a chair by the table to sit down. "I have so many questions."

"I'm sure you do." He tilted his head to the side, so low his ear nearly brushed his too colorful shirt. "Perhaps there is time to answer one or two. We'll hear the singing before the towners return."

Leonard's finger drew a circle around a stain mark on the table. Where to begin? There were so many questions. "Did you know your parenta, like I did?" The words blurted out before he could stop them. Ethen was a talkie. He wouldn't like straight questions. He should have asked simpler lead in questions first, and maybe in a few more light cycles been able to ask that question. Mid conversation. Not at the beginning.

Ethen laughed. "I knew my parenta. Barely. Taken from her at trainee age. I even knew my legator. We knew them then. I'm the last alive to know mine."

"I thought it had been longer." Leonard leaned forward to listen to the man's raspy voice.

"I'm the last. Over one hundred sun cycles old. They tried to wipe out memories of them and make us forget knowing who we came from." He moved the chair closer to the table.

"How?"

"Keeping us busy. Teaching us it wasn't the way we would live. They wanted us to forget, to ease the future."

"Because of the virus?" Leonard observed the man's face closely.

Ethen nodded. "I thought." He coughed.

"I didn't think they'd allow me to remember. My legator was the cause of the virus." Ethen looked away. His hands moved involuntarily, as if trying to find something.

"I don't know his name. The Matrilineal Council said it happened. Was it on the list?" Did Ria or Narona know about this? Or the man's name? Leonard wanted to ask. Of course, he couldn't chat about them across the tablets. And he might never see them again.

Ethen nodded and raised his hands to the table. He leaned forward. "My legator was sentenced to death by the Council. However, he begged for mercy. To find an antidote. He worked on one until he died a few sun cycles later. I was his first apprentice. So I knew what happened. And tried to help reverse it."

"Did it work?"

"No. I was denied the right to finish my work. Women took it on. No other male was allowed to work with the genetic centers. We have one man from across the river in Nally that comes over to help with cleaning the genetic center. He isn't allowed to see any work. Your generation may be able to. I'm not sure how many generations were barred from it." Ethen leaned back and breathed several deep raspy breaths.

"Does that bother you?"

Distant singing began. So low, at first it sounded like bird song.

"No. My legator had taken war criminal knowledge and tried to use it to increase the number of babies women could have to two, or more. It rebounded and made them infertile. We almost lost our future."

The singing edged closer.

"The few who remained fertile, then had to become parentas to too many." Leonard leaned back.

"Which is why they need your help." Ethen backed up and spun the chair around. He went out the door and left it open.

The singers called to him.

Leonard stood and pushed his chair under the table. He followed the singers to the town. The story wasn't as he expected. Perhaps Ethen's part had been forgotten, not purposely left out. Or, perhaps they had convinced him of his part. There were so many subtle ways to alter people's minds. He knew that from both history, and Jendal's world. They had tried to change Jendal, and had succeeded in changing him in ways they never have expected. Though not into the person his world wanted him to be.

Chapter 34 - Earth

Jendal - Age 23

Jendal pushed his blanket aside. Time to feed Krill.

Opal was on the couch under her weighted blanket. She had barely slept. Her tousled hair on the pillows showed how much she had tossed and turned. He glanced at the clock. A half hour to take care of Krill before he had to leave to reach the boat dock on time. Normally, Opal checked in the weekly supply ship while he slept. Not today.

Jendal was normally asleep when the supply ships came in. Even when he was awake, the mainlanders were people he preferred to avoid. He couldn't quite catch some of the phrases they used, or understand their meanings. While that had always been common in the schools he had known, when foreign languages were mixed in, it heightened his fear.

Perhaps, if he had never known Penny or Madella, he might be intrigued, instead of afraid of what the men on the boats were saying. If he had never been in trouble. In court. Instead, he feared they were making fun of him, or worse. He had known bullies. Too many. He shook his head. No time for those thoughts today.

He checked his email to see if anything had arrived while he fed Krill. Nothing. As he placed her back beside the sleeping cat, and tattered Owly, he rubbed her forehead. "Sleep little one. You can wake up later for the day." He picked up his sunglasses as he walked out the door. Being awake mostly at night made bright sunshine painful at times.

It didn't take long to reach the boat dock. He sat on one of the wooden benches he and Uncle Henry had made before he left for the mainland. It had a storage area under the seat. They didn't keep much there. A few full water bottles and a spare rope in case they were needed when a boat arrived. Nothing to protect anyone if an unwelcome visitor arrived. However, an unexpected visitor who happened upon the stored items could use them against the family, if they arrived when no one was watching.

A pale dot slipped into a view on the horizon. It enlarged as it grew closer. The supply ship coalesced from the splattered colors that bounded among the waves.

Jendal yawned. No need to hide the yawn behind his hand. No one could see him. And they knew he only had three hours of sleep. He'd need a light mask when the boat arrived. Those who brought the supplies didn't know him, and he didn't dare be himself around them. Of course, they'd only be here a few minutes today.

The noise grew louder. As the boat approached, he stood up and shielded his eyes to see them better. The two supply merchants, Uncle Henry, and Dr. Newell. How they had been able to reach the supply boat in time was a mystery, he'd soon know the answer. Most likely, Opal had messaged them earlier in the evening while he had been working in the observatory.

After the boat docked, Uncle Henry and Dr. Newell jumped off to take the packages the supply merchants tossed them.

Jendal walked up to catch one they had to hand over the fragile package. A new lense for a hand telescope for Opal. "Thanks."

They all watched the boat motor away. When the sound of the motor devolved into the sound of waves crashing and seagulls cawing, they turned to the island with their packages. No one had spoken.

Jendal smiled. They knew he needed thinking time. It was time to break into words. Difficult words. To ask for the help he so desperately needed to protect himself, his family, and his home. "Any suggestions?"

Uncle Henry grunted under the packages of food he carried. "Yes. Let's deliver this, then we will look at the runway."

"And find places they could come ashore unexpectedly." Dr. Newell adjusted his load.

Jendal pushed his sunglasses up with the top of the load he carried. He had to say the words. Even though he didn't want to. "Would we be safer in the city? At least temporarily?"

Uncle Henry and Dr. Newell both paused and looked in his direction. They shook their heads as they continued walking toward Hanger Home.

"No. Too dangerous. You don't know the language, the customs, or anyone other than us few to feel safe." Dr. Newell placed his

package down on the picnic table to wipe his face. "You would be in more danger there. We couldn't protect you."

It didn't take long to deliver the food the food and supplies to the downstairs kitchen and tables. Jendal left the telescope lenses on the counter shelf where mail for him and Opal was normally left. They wouldn't disappear. As his hands left the package, a cat jumped on one of the game tables. He pushed the fragile package closer to the wall so it wouldn't be knocked off by a cat.

Soon, they'd have to watch for grabby baby fingers as Krill grew. Another worry and change in the way they lived. They wouldn't be able to leave projects, food, or other objects out. If she hurt herself, or swallowed something, there was no hospital they could reach in less than five hours. If that, dependent on phone calls, weather, tides, and sea surge.

He hadn't even seen the nearest hospital. His mother and a midwife had stayed on the island near the time Opal gave birth, and for a few weeks before and afterwards. That had been a slightly stressful time with two extra people coming and going. Perhaps life would feel safer if the smaller building did have a permanent family they knew and trusted.

They walked back to the battered air strip. He remembered landing here when he was sixteen. Seven years on this wonderful island, and he didn't want to leave. He felt more at home here, and freer, than anywhere he had ever lived. He had lived here a third of his life. However, it seemed like a short dream after the life-long year in the hospital.

A memory surfaced of the time Uncle Henry and Aunt Zalena had left with Tamela and taken Opal with them. Then, when she returned. And stayed by his side. She had tested the city life, and found it didn't suit her at all. This was home. His island. He would defend it.

Uncle Henry whistled when he viewed the air strip. "A plane would have a tough time. That hurricane did a number on it, didn't it?"

Jendal nodded. "They can't land, can they?"

Uncle Henry reached down to check one of the ruts. "I'd like to say no. However. I'm not an expert. And we don't know what kind of jet they may have, or find. Some are designed to set down in rough terrain."

"So, unless we fill the runway with big stuff, or fully grown trees, we can't totally prevent someone from landing?"

Uncle Henry gestured. "Fraid so. There isn't much junk sitting around here."

"We use everything. Or ship a few bits back to the mainland to be burned for fuel there."

Dr. Newell had walked on down to the tiny house at the end of the strip. A tiny place that reminded him of Uncle Henry's home. They had mostly ignored it for a few years. It was overgrown. Opal had kept the inside neat, and used it as a place to bring Krill to rest out of the midday sun, while the rest of the team slept.

He and Uncle Henry walked on to meet him.

"How long does it take to walk the island perimeter? I never timed it before." Dr. Newell pushed a few bush limbs out of his way.

"Depends more on your health than mine. Maybe an hour." Jendal glanced at the house. Could they disguise it, and make it a safe place? Or if Opal's family found her and the baby there, would it traumatize her more than she already was at the thought of them?

They turned back to the boat dock to walk around the island along the beach edges. In places, the beach was a few hundred feet wide to the tree line. In others, only a few feet. Some rocks littered one side. Big enough for a boat to tie up on. No caves big enough for people to hide in. Which was both good, and bad. There were no real island defenses. Not without a lot more people than the island could support. They signed and talked as they pointed out the issues and the topography. Nothing helpful. It left Jendal with a feeling of defeat before the dangers they faced.

By the time they made it back to Opal's garden, they were all exhausted. Jendal went inside the Hanger Home to bring out fresh cups of water. When he returned Dr. Newell and Uncle Henry were deep in muffled conversation. He placed the tray down on the picnic table. "I'm out of ideas. Too little sleep. I've tried not to worry Opal, though I've been worried for a while."

Uncle Henry picked up two of the cups and handed one to Dr. Newell. "We have been also. I wish she had dropped contact at some point. It's difficult to leave family behind."

"That might have made it worse sooner." Dr. Newell sipped some water. "They might have come looking for her. Tried to pull her back in. Surprised they waited this long."

Uncle Henry glanced over at Dr. Newell as they appeared to share a private thought.

"It's not Opal they want, is it?"

Uncle Henry looked toward the house at the end of the runway.

"Probably not." Dr. Newell said. "How often did they communicate with her before they knew about Krill?"

Jendal thought back. He didn't go through Opal's records. Or even ask specifically. She hadn't mentioned them at all recently. Only during the last week. "They wouldn't hurt her, would they?"

Uncle Henry looked uncomfortable as he sat the empty cup down on the table. His hands shook and he looked back at the house before answering. "Perhaps. They may want to fix the mistakes they made with Opal. I wouldn't count on that. They have a history. Not a good one. Of buying whatever they want."

"And if they take her?"

"Due to Krill's citizenship issues, and Opal's age when she left, with their permission at the time, though they won't admit it now that she has a baby." Uncle Henry looked away.

"Serious legal troubles." Dr. Newell said.

"So, we'd all need to run again? I'd have to quit my research? I'm so close. I can't leave Wenda and Vivian to do it all alone." Jendal closed his eyes. "We don't have enough time, do we?"

"No." Uncle Henry pulled out his phone. "I hear an engine in the distance."

"We aren't expecting anyone." Jendal pulled deep into himself. His brain swirled toward shutdown. Somehow, he had to hold off the meltdown.

Dr. Newell stood up. "Go get Opal and Krill. Meet us beside the cooler in Hanger House in ten minutes. Grab everything you can. We don't have much time."

Jendal willed his frozen and stiff muscles to move. "What will we do?"

"There is a secret built into Hanger House. Just in case. Hurry."

Jendal ran inside. He dashed up the stairs and opened the door to the apartment.

Opal was holding Krill and rocking her, with tears streaming down her face. Her phone was upside down beside her.

Jendal pulled his baby daughter carefully out of Opal's arms. "Grab your phone. And laptop. Hurry."

She looked up at him. "They are coming."

He nodded. "Hurry. Uncle Henry has a plan."

She appeared to move in slow motion as she pulled the blanket over her shoulders. She picked up her phone and put it in her pocket.

Jendal cringed. As slow as she was moving, they'd be here before he got her downstairs.

Wenda barged into the room. "Take them downstairs. I'll grab the computers and personals. Vivian is right behind me."

He touched Opal's arm. "Stay strong."

She nodded. "Don't let them near her."

Within minutes, they were downstairs by the cooler door.

Uncle Henry rushed them inside. A set of shelves had been emptied and moved. A door stood open. "A cave we made for you both years ago. Follow it. It leads to the small house, although that entrance is blocked. It can only be opened from inside the tunnel. Leads to under the bed."

Opal nodded.

He held the door open with one hand, and encouraged Opal to go in before him.

Wenda and Vivian arrived behind them and pushed in a couple of boxes of items jumbled together. On top was Opal's weighted blanket.

They pushed the door closed. Jendal heard the shelves shoved back in place and reloaded.

Jendal handed Krill back to Opal and held her close. The tunnel was chilly, though not cold.

Opal stumbled forward down a set of rock stairs to a small light.

Jendal looked up. An opening in the runway allowed both light and air into the cold and dark passage.

"Some air holes were plugged. I forgot about this place. I wasn't supposed to know about it."

A deep rumble shook the ground over their heads.

He pulled her close.

Krill burped.

Uncle Henry's voice boomed out as the engines stopped overhead. "This is a private Denmark scientific island. Please leave. You are disturbing the delicate equipment."

A man laughed. "We are looking for our kidnapped daughter. She had her kidnapper's baby. And we have to find them. To take them home."

Opal paled in the darkness. She nodded. It was them.

"This island is owned and controlled by Denmark. There are no kidnappers here. Nowhere to hide. We have contacted authorities. They will be here soon if you do not leave."

Had he actually contacted them?

"We will have a look around to verify." The man's voice moved off.

It would take an hour for them to explore the island. Or more, since they didn't know it.

"Thirty minutes." Uncle Henry's voice echoed.

Did he mean thirty minutes to explore, or thirty minutes until help arrived?

Jendal held Opal close and covered Krill better with the blanket. Thirty minutes in the dark and chill would feel like hours. He calmed his breathing. Too similar to the hospital.

Unlike there, here he was protected. He didn't dare make any noise, since he couldn't feel the footsteps above them.

Chapter 35 - Galataria

Leonard - Age 25

The bridge was partially built between Orlena and Nally. Stones nestled together with little need for mortar, other than a thin layer between, so thin, it wouldn't be visible once it dried. The supports had been finished, and the framework ready to build the main walkway, wide enough for solar carts. An arch at each end would contain a closable gate of wood. Wood had to be solar shipped in from a northeast community that worked with wood. Leonard rested between lifting and setting stones. His helper from Nally had taken the boat back across the river for more supplies.

A deep sound rumbled from Orlena behind him. Voices lifted in a deep, dark song.

It sent chills up Leonard's spine. He had heard similar before. When someone died. Though never this loud. Nor as many voices.

The singing and crooning crept closer. The voices became clearer. Words began to be clearer. Drums beat to alert Nally. It must be someone important.

People filled the riverside beside the boats on Nally's edge. Men would be here soon.

Leonard ran toward the sounds.

As the women arrived, they carried a stretcher. Their words of sadness and joy overlapped so much he couldn't comprehend the specific words.

One thin hand slipped over the edge of the stretcher.

Leonard sighed as he joined the women. Ethen. Ethen had achieved a peace he had never known in life. This community celebrated death as much as they celebrated birth. And every light cycle in between. He smiled. Best to join in the festivities, even if he didn't know the song words. Many of which seemed to be from a forgotten time, or place.

The whole population of both towns joined in the walk to the sea. Here, they lit a fire and shared stories of Ethen's life until the fishers and hunters returned. Stories of Ethen, both those he knew, and those he didn't ,would echo around the beach til dusk.

Children scattered about the sand and shoreline looking for driftwood as they sang. The driftwood lit the fires from which they shared their final meal with Ethen.

Leonard joined the men preparing the rocks to form the special funeral feast circles. He peered at each one, even those he didn't know by name. Many appeared to have Ethen's eyes. A smile, a hair curled on the forehead. Everything reminded him of the man he had only known two sun cycles.

Waves washed in.

Even the runners had returned from distant villages.

The singing never seemed to end. When one person paused to rest, others joined in. Songs of Ethen's trainee time, his apprentice sun cycles, and the gifts he had given them in fifty-two sun cycles as a scholar.

The final meal was eaten. Leonard himself took a piece of Ethen's favorite fish to place in the mentor of so many's hands.

The women gathered as the last men said goodbye to their friend. Their mentor. Perhaps, their legator. They lifted the stretcher and waded out into the sea. Salty waves tried to wash them back in to land. Children followed behind.

Their strength as fishers and hunters helped them push themselves, and their cargo, along the line of sandbars that reached out farther than the town's length beyond the shoreline.

Boys stopped and waited, lifting their voices in song from the end of the first sandbar. Girls followed their mothers to the end of the line of sandbars.

Eventually, the women were beyond the sandbars that protected both towns along the great river's edge from flooding in the storm season. So far out, that all of them, and the stretcher, appeared like a solid dot on the seascape.

The singing was softer as they returned to land. The boys followed behind the girls as they lifted their voices in a memory song. Women pulled themselves out of the sea and wiped the sand and salt off of their feet.

Men doused the fires and piled the rocks where the funeral rock pile was stacked.

Slowly, the people of both villages dispersed back to their homes on each side of the river. The bridge would make it easier. A few more moon cycles. If there were no more funerals.

Leonard stayed behind. He waited. For what, he was unsure. The tiny dot had drifted off, toward the sunset, so far, if he hadn't watched it float away, the speck would be invisible among the waves.

He waited. For what comfort, he didn't know.

In the villages, the talk would be of which woman would give birth next. Her child would be honored with Ethen's name if a boy. He had been the village bridge. The unspoken leader, even though the women led as they did in all villages. His words had carried weight. However, his words had never over ridden theirs.

So unlike the rest of Galataria.

And not at all like Jendal's world.

The sun slipped over the trees.

Leonard sat up from the sand and carefully wiped his hands before wiping his eyes awake.

Somehow, he had to share all the information with Blaise, Ria, and Narona that he had learned from Ethen before he forgot it. The question was how to do so safely. He couldn't send the stories over the charged tablets. The Matrilineal Council might discover what he had learned. And be fearful of how he intended to use the knowledge. If he wrote with pen and paper, the message could be sent through the solar cart system. The message might easily be lost. By sea, it would be lost as well. Almost for sure. Solar ships were generally safe except during storm season. Wind and rain could destroy, or fragment, written words.

There was no one here he trusted to take the stories to Blaise, Ria, or Narona. And he couldn't leave the bridge unfinished. When he reached deep into his thoughts and feelings, he felt safe here. Never wanting to leave. Not even to return to Ria or Narona with their children.

If he received news of his mother's death, he might go for the funeral if a solar ship was available. However, that was a several light cycle journey, and she would be long dead before he arrived. There wouldn't be a party there either. Not like here, where they were given to the sea.

His birth village took dead bodies to the swamp to return as part of the natural food chain. Groundwater was too close to the surface to dig, and damaged the roots of living plants and trees. They didn't

cremate, like many inland villages. They allowed the ancestors to return their bodies as a gift to the descendants of animals whom they had eaten while alive.

If his parenta died, he'd make a hand sized raft and add a piece of cloth in memory of her. Then, he would go out as far as men were allowed to go, the docks the solar ships docked at, and release it there, in her memory.

There was one possibility. If Gilbertan visited to hear the stories and return with them to Ria, Narona, and Blaise. Signed words could be held in confidence. Especially here, where so few even knew the signs. Gilbertan needed some extra training, so he had a reason to make the trip and quietly collect the stories.

He stood up and wiped the sand off of himself. He'd send a short message to Blaise and to Gilbertan asking for Gilbertan's help with the stonework. Though it wasn't Gilbertan's specialty, he did need to train for his next apprenticeship, the one he would hold in his legator sun cycles.

Leonard smiled as he walked back to the home that had once been Ethen's. His own legator sun cycles were half over. It was time to choose a new apprenticeship. Maybe a trainer like Blaise.

After he sent the messages to Blaise and Gilbertan, he fixed something to eat. A clam chowder he had made and chilled a few light cycles before. It was perfect.

Regular work would be set aside in the towns for a light cycle or two. Everyone would be remembering Ethen. And cleaning out cobwebs.

Leonard reached under the bed. There was hidden in a small hole a set of colored rocks that Ethen had mentioned. To read when his death had occurred. He dug out the packed dirt and reached into the hole.

Small rocks with signs on them were buried a hand length down. The paint was face down, to protect it from everything except dampness.

Leonard turned them over and tried to put them in order. Signs he didn't quite recognize were painted on several. As he pulled the words together, the confusing signs became clearer. They were from the war time. The signs had been repainted more than once, to last through time. It was a tale of the violent men who lived in the

locked towns. The way women had controlled them. Tamed them. Allowed them to live to help rebuild society without danger.

He turned one rock over and over a few times. The sign looked familiar. He had seen it a few times.

A tap on the window, and Leonard lifted his head. A bird. He glanced back at the rock. He knew the sign, though it had changed some since the original sign had been painted on the rock. Either through a mis-copy, or the passage of sun cycles.

It was the sign for the medication given to Vincent and those like him. Narona had used the sign in conversation with Ria. A little too fast for him to catch. If it was the same, or a slightly altered medication, it was still being used for the same purpose.

Leonard breathed deeply. This was forbidden knowledge. Knowledge only a few should possess.

That worried him. He knew how such medications were used in Jendal's world. Had they been used on generations of Galataria's men for the same reason? Were they used in the men's villages?

His charged tablet dinged. A message from Blaise. Gilbertan could be spared to join him soon. It would be a whole moon cycle before he arrived.

Was there a way to ask Blaise without the council finding out over the tablet? Would he even know?

A seagull tapped the window.

Leonard looked up at it.

The seagull had followed him for much of his time here. Perhaps a former friend of Ethen.

Leonard went outside to sit on the bench Ethen had sat on when Leonard arrived.

The seagull joined him. Its antics, head bobbing, and wing flutters brought him out of his fear.

If the medications were used, it was rare. He had never been fed anything. And he had known the village of Genetica well. None there either. Those altering medications were only known, and compounded by, specific healers.

Yes. Narona had mentioned needing to contact one. A healer that didn't reside in their village. Or anywhere near, when the Matrilineal Council had made its decision about Vincent.

The thought of healers drifted his mind to his almost forgotten talkie sister, Arilla. And even his parenta. Arilla had stayed to live

with their parenta while she had apprenticed to Healer Ropen. In her last message, she had mentioned apprenticing to Doctor Janel for her parenta generation. In between raising the two babies she already had, and the two more she wanted. She had also mentioned that both of her daughters were signers, like him and Gilbertan, so their parenta was happy to help raise them.

When the seagull flew off, Leonard walked back into the small house. One room. Not at all like his mother's busy house, or even most of the houses in Orlena. More like all men's houses he knew.

He pulled out his charged tablet and sent a message to his sister. Arilla might know something that would help him understand the message better. He had to word it carefully. It took the majority of mid light to compose the message. A response arrived the same light cycle.

Chapter 36 - Earth

Jendal - Age 25

The computers beeped. They had computed some surprising information in the last hour. Those folded bits of metal were still there. They appeared to be growing. Perhaps more space debris were sticking to them as they floated above Earth. What was oddest, was that the trajectories showed they should have fallen further into the atmosphere, and burned up two years, or longer, ago. They hadn't. Somehow, they maintained their orbit. And grew.

"I don't understand it." Jendal leaned back so Vivian and Wenda could view the data.

"No one does." Vivian marked a note on her pad. "We need to send a robot camera to check out the micro satellites."

"I don't like calling them satellites." Wenda stepped away from the computer and back to the one she was working on. "No one is known to be controlling them. Or preventing their fall to Earth."

"What else would you call them?" Jendal glanced at her.

"No idea. Not a satellite. That would indicate possible nefarious meaning. Someone isn't telling the truth." She turned her chair away.

Jendal sighed as he made a few more notes on the near Earth objects. Too near. It was quite possible they simply hadn't asked the correct person. With eight billion people living, there was no way they had asked them all. Only the people governments knew were doing space work. And lots of people in poorer countries did many things without their government's knowledge. Even in richer countries, billionaires accomplished many things governments didn't have the money, time, or expertise to begin, or complete.

Perhaps, they were mini satellites from someone trying to develop free internet for a small country. Or an island nation. It made sense.

Except, the trajectories did not follow that pattern either. They appeared random. As if stuck in an atmospheric tide, and swept along, without being able to escape. Which wasn't supposed to happen. The increased mass and density should have caused them

to sink. Perhaps some sleep would make the data settle. Jendal saved his information and closed down the computer for the day.

"I'll be right behind you," Vivian called as he unlocked the observatory door and walked out. He nodded back.

Locks and keys. Not needed before that scary day two years ago when Opal's parents arrived. Now, they locked the observatory and Hanger Home. And Medical Cottage. Doors and windows were no longer left open in the warm sunny days. They lived in the same fear here that they would have in the city.

True, it wasn't quite the same. Sometimes, they left the doors open for short bits of time. And the Medical Cottage now had a nice retired couple, their daughter, and three grandchildren living in it for Krill to play with.

Opal's parents had been detained by the Denmark authorities. The authorities had warned then not to return to the island again, and invalidated their European passports. They shouldn't be able to return. At least not through official channels. However, there was always the risk they would send someone in their place.

Even though the island was home, it didn't feel as safe as it had two years ago. The airstrip had been completely removed. A small helicopter pad had been added next to the Medical Cottage. Defenses had been added around the island. Little more than trip alarms, if something the size of even a canoe landed, an alarm would sound at both Hanger Home and the observatory. So far nothing. Other than a few ocean mammals and debris.

Dr. Newell and Jendal's mother planned to return soon. They would live in one of the apartments in Hanger Home.

Opal had been so frightened, that she no longer met the supply boats. It wasn't safe for Jendal, so the retired couple did that. They loaded the supplies into a hand wagon, and the children and their mother trundled them up the path to Hanger Home. The small path had been widened and leveled so that the wagon was easily pulled through.

Before long, Jendal had reached the door to Hanger Home. He unlocked the door. He closed and locked it solidly behind him, making sure it was shut. Vivian and Wenda should be in soon. However, the women frequently strolled in the flowers or garden before returning for the dinner Opal had made for them, and left in the communal kitchen. In a few weeks, they'd move most of the

cooking back downstairs to it. Much easier with more people living there.

Jendal walked into the kitchen area. Behind the cooking area was the cooler with the hidden door that led to the tunnel he, Opal, and Krill had hidden in two years ago. At times, it seemed like only hours ago they had emerged. Cold, dirty, and scared. Even now, they maintained it. Just in case.

He walked upstairs to his apartment.

Krill played on the floor building something out of wooden blocks. Some of them had tiny paintings Opal had made on them. Most of the paintings were of windows with people waving, and flower pots hanging. A few had dogs and cats in them, with their almost microscopic tongues hanging out.

Opal walked into the main room. "Dinner is ready." She held her hand out to Krill.

Krill placed the last block in her hand before standing up.

Jendal studied the wall his daughter had made. A good solid wall of pictures. She was never alone with so many people on the blocks.

Trickle meowed at him.

He reached down to pet her.

Piper was no longer with them. His memory remained. He had died of old age soon after Krill had been born.

Krill was ready for her daytime activities to start, as Jendal was ready for his sleeping time.

Opal left her in the main room with Trickle to guard her and followed Jendal to the bedroom. She sat beside him.

He leaned into the pillow. She wanted to talk. That he knew. It wouldn't do any good to rush her. Jendal didn't turn off the light, in case she chose signing over spoken words.

After a few moments, she whispered a word. "Leonard." She held her signing hand up. "Heard from?"

Jendal thought a few moments. How long had it been since he had heard the thoughts of his childhood friend? Felt the connection? Seen the soft light, and heard the birds that only live with Leonard and not on Earth. As far as he knew. "Too long."

"Safe there?" Her hands shook.

Jendal touched Opal's hands. They stilled. He wiped a tear off her cheek. "I will try to find him. Let me see if he comes to me in my dreams."

She nodded and left the room. The door closed softly behind her.

Safety. He had once found safety and solace in Leonard's world. Whether in sleeping or waking dreams. The thought of safety prevented him from sleeping. Where was Leonard? Could he reach him? Would he, Opal, and Krill be safe there?

Would he have to leave his discoveries behind to find out? He could picture the tiny pieces of space debris in his mind. They appeared to be metal and seemed to spin and twirl without known cause or reason. His mind drifted into sleep thinking about the twirling bits of debris.

When Jendal woke in the afternoon, his mind had retained the connection between the debris and Leonard. Somehow, they must be connected. He had to reach him. And still hadn't in his sleep. He hadn't tried to actively reach him in years, not as the fear had overtaken Leonard. Now where was he?

Jendal drifted on the verge of sleep. A seagull fluttered into view. He pictured himself astride the seagull's back. Before long, the seagull tapped at a window.

Leonard stepped out of the house to join the seagull. His mind swirled with thoughts and emotions. Moving too fast. Much as Jendal's used to do.

Jendal slipped off the seagull in his mind and entered what resembled a sea shack. Inside were stones with signs painted on them. His mind moved back to Leonard's mind. The words and signs his mind were making flashed around as they slowed down. Jendal understood the fear. Somehow the signs on the stones had said scared him.

He spoke and signed to Leonard's mind, as he had in past years. Trying to calm him.

Leonard appeared to understand. And relax.

Jendal pulled himself awake as the seagull lifted off in flight. A sight to behold in either world.

Something was wrong in Jendal's world. There, they would be safe from Opal's parents. And he could help the friend who had

rescued him more times than he could remember, or even know, in his first two decades of life.

When he walked out into the main living area, Opal glanced up at him.

He nodded before he signed to her. "I'll find him. Somehow. It's a real world. A safe world."

She handed him a napkin with a sandwich in it, all prepared.

He smiled at her. She was right, he'd better go to work. Now. While Wenda and Vivian slept.

He waved goodbye to Krill and Trickle.

He unlocked the observatory and turned on the lights. It was so quiet and peaceful. No beeping equipment. No hum of the computers. Though a few were storing information the telescope was sending them, they were on nap mode, unless certain perimeters were met.

Jendal checked the results on the main screen before he turned his computer on. Nothing that seemed to matter in the trickle of new developments.

He switched to the private side of the computer. The one Wenda and Vivian didn't have access to. Through those channels, he typed an email to Uncle Henry and to Dr. Newell. If he found a way to reach Leonard's world, he planned on taking it. And the window might not be open long enough to inform them when it happened.

Uncle Henry replied quickly. "Stay safe. And good luck. Leave a clue."

Leave a clue. That was to prove if they went willingly, or were kidnapped by Opal's family and friends.

Dr. Newell's reply took longer. In fact, he was already reviewing the results of the previous three years of research on the unknown objects before it arrived. The message was in his mother's voice. "Hope to see you soon, before you go. Don't wait, if you have the chance."

He nodded. To see his mother again would be wonderful. They had shared the stories of Leonard and his world when he was young. In fact, she had spoken of a few dreams of the world herself. She too had been touched by Leonard's home. Wherever it was.

It seemed only minutes more before Vivian and Wenda arrived for the evening's work shift. He grunted at them as he hunched over the numbers, figures, and pictures. The answer was there. A safe place, if he figured out how to reach it.

Chapter 37 - Galataria

Leonard - Age 26

Leonard's charged tablet dinged. It had been four moon cycles since Gilbertan had arrived, visited for a moon, and returned to Genetica with the stories of Ethen to transfer to Blaise. A few messages had gone back and forth, coded so the Matrilineal Council wouldn't know what they were discussing.

It felt strange and scary to hide things. To be untrue. However, they all agreed that to be open with this information would cause worse problems, more fear, and more danger, than Vincent had created. It must not become common knowledge that they knew about how a few men were controlled now, and many had been in the past.

The difficulty in conflicting rules and laws was one of the most difficult to overcome. In many ways, it was similar to the childhood training to never put anything in your ears, and unexpectedly dealing with the fear of hearing loss from putting something in your ears when you needed hearing aids. Except, this was far more serious. Rather than potentially damaging yourself, this hidden knowledge could lead to damage for all people. The conflict was real. For all of them.

The message was from Ria. Her second apprenticeship had been to work with the genetics of certain extinct butterflies and bees to try to bring more back from extinction. There simply wasn't enough diversity among them. Certain crops still had to be pollinated by hand. So they needed specific bees and butterflies to do the job. Or, risk the loss of some plant species completely.

One of the most missed was the beautiful monarch. The plants they needed to survive had been recovered, and needed their pollination to survive. However, they'd have to give it a new name. Partly because the genetics would be altered. Primarily, because of the cultural connotations.

Ria had messaged an associate researcher in Dinah about the Monarch. A few light cycles later, a living pair of Monarchs appeared in her office. A message on her charged tablet wished her

hope at revitalizing the species appeared the same early light from the colleague.

She and Narona had asked him to visit them in Maryiana. Even though it would be more than a moon before he reached them by solar ship. How had he done it?

Leonard reached into his memory of Dinah. Somewhere on the other side of Galataria. They kept all the technology working and communicating. Their strengths were focused on the tiny bots that created the tablets, solar collectors, and other tech objects that made modern life the way it was.

However, their history was shaky in his memory. Dinah culture had merged with several others after the Devolution War to survive. With whom, he had long forgotten, if he had ever learned. Ria would know, as she was the historian. His memory of Dinah culture was shaky from Galataria standards, and it was mixed up with multiple cultures from Jendal's world. Some nations he had studied. Jendal and Opal emulated some aspects of in their home.

Jendal. Jendal had sent him many fearful dreams lately. His world was full of fear. No pain. No dark places. Only fear. Of people. Which was strange. He had Opal, Krill, and a whole bunch of other people he trusted around him all the time. However, the fear was so strong, the sensations affected Leonard's responses, even in his regular routines.

He sent a message to Ria before he left. "Check on my bridge tree please." The chestnut tree was full grown, and perhaps offering chestnuts to the squirrels as they danced across the bridge he had designed. It wouldn't be the same as the bridge here. The bridge between Genetica and Maryiana spanned four home lengths.

The bridge between Nally and Orlena spanned forty-six home lengths. It had been the work of over two sun cycles. With the help of most of the men from Nally, at some point or another. There was no greater creation society expected of him. He could stay here, as Ethen had, watching the bridge, protecting it from floods until he moved to the scholarly home. Or leave it for one of his apprentices to maintain.

Leonard focused on the bridge supports while waiting for a reply from Ria. When it appeared, her request was unexpected. "Please return home to Maryiana. Visit Arilla first."

It would take over a moon cycle to reach Maryiana. To meet Arilla, he'd have to travel on a solar ship. The next solar ship would leave in three light cycles.

A quarter moon cycle later, Leonard arrived in Cralin. His parenta was glad to see him. She enjoyed her time outside under the trees, and rarely spoke, especially since Arilla and her signer daughters lived with her. He sat outside on the bench he had played on as a toddler. The descendants of the birds he had known kept nests on the nesting ledge. Other than a few signs of welcome, there was little to say. They enjoyed the peace and natural sounds of the world around them.

Arilla's daughters played softly around the small clearing. They built with twigs. And watched young bunnies hop around in the muted sunshine.

A few deer wandered into the clearing. Birds sang.

Arilla returned from her training with Doctor Janel. Her words disturbed the peace and calm long before she arrived. The birds fluttered and silenced, as if they knew their voices wouldn't be heard. The deer left the clearing.

Arilla rounded the corner. "Hi Leonard. I have several stories to tell you."

Leonard leaned back. "Only the one you need to share with me please, the solar ship leaves next early light."

"They are tangled together." Arilla paced up and down the clearing. She signed to her daughters to go inside. "Parenta?"

Their parenta nodded.

Arilla sat beside Leonard. "What I'm going to tell you is secret. Ria and Narona should know. The knowledge should have been passed to them by their trainers. However, they seem to have not received the spoken training."

"It is possible. One of the trainers died soon after Narona's apprentice began in Maryiana. Shouldn't they have had the knowledge already before they left Yellowwood?"

Arilla shook her head. "Trainers there wouldn't have known it. I shouldn't. Only Narona, Ria, and a few in Maryiana should have access to it."

"Why? How do you know it?"

"Grandparenta. She knew it and told me. Believed I could use the knowledge. She was afraid it died before Narona learned it."

"Why didn't you contact Narona?"

Arilla leaned closer and spoke softly. "Most of the Matrilineal Council is unaware of the experiment began when grandparenta was a geneticist."

"Experiment?"

"When the Matrilineal Council was first formed, they wanted to save the wild species by any means possible. The seed vaults had helped, for some plants. One seed vault had been destroyed. The animal genetic vault was also destroyed. The cooler system was broken, and all of the stored DNA and embryos had defrosted. With no hope of reviving them."

He gasped.

"Dinah developed a program. Grandparenta worked on it from her location in Maryiana."

Leonard closed his eyes and signed. "So, the researcher in Dinah doesn't known Narona has no idea about the experiment?"

Arilla nodded. "She sent me the message she sent you. I told her to delete any trace of the message and have you visit here. Many of the newer members of the Matrilineal Council have never been to Maryiana and are not aware of the project. However, they may be more understanding of the need."

"How does it work?"

"Grandparenta didn't say. Or, she has forgotten. Only those in the location in Dinah know now." Arilla leaned too close to continue. "Somehow, they use an orbital communication mirror. Originally, it could grab bits of genetic material from the past. Or, what they believed was the past. Grandparenta never told them about the dreams. Only our parenta and you have them. That we are aware of."

Leonard gasped. "I didn't know you knew."

Arilla laughed.

His parenta reached in to sign. "I told her when I found out about the experiment a few light cycles ago."

"Originally, they couldn't grab more than part of the genes. Which is why revived animals are not genetically the same as before the war."

"So, Dinah thinks they are reaching the past." Leonard peered at a bird as it flew past. That colorful bird was different than pre-war species. A combination of similar species.

"Some of the genetic combinations are a better fit for our environment. However, they haven't ended the experiment. They've enlarged it."

"How?"

"It used to only be able to collect bits of genetic code."

"Okay." He signed.

Arilla glanced at their parenta. "Then, they accidentally switched Jendal and didn't realize it."

"And maybe Vincent."

Arilla nodded. "They seem to have made a few other unsuspecting genetic small live transfers. They believed the transfers were from the past. Jendal doesn't live in our past. Ria has confirmed it. His history doesn't match ours."

"Then where? He's a dream. His world improved for many sun cycles. Now it is all fear again. Too much swirling color."

"You still want to rescue him?"

"How?"

Parenta nodded. "His dreams reach you. You can reach him."

"I know." He remembered the time he had even controlled Jendal's leg and knocked a woman down. Something he would never dare do in Genetica. Or need to do.

"Go back to Maryiana. We have no idea how it works. They can now transmit insects and small mammals knowingly. Perhaps, there is hope. Keep it confidential." Arilla held her finger to her lips.

"That's trouble. What happened before."

"Also what saved us. They've been working with it for three generations."

Ethen had said something about that. Once. Or more than once. The list of names and dates Blaise had given him had been a list of ancestors of Ethen's. The old date system had changed. "Could he survive in our world?"

"He's from here." Arilla drew circles in the dirt with a small stick.

"He grew up there. Wherever, or whenever, there is."

His sister looked at him. " It's his only chance."

"How do they do it?"

"We don't know. Sometimes, we think it is unintentional. Or unknown consequences."

"So, the mirror has a mind of its own?"

Arilla laughed. "Not necessarily. It might be malfunctioning. It may need replacing with fresh parts. All the updates from various locations may be overloading it, if they contradict each other."

"Can it save Jendal?"

"I don't know. Go. Have Narona ask for Jendal, and those by name he worries about. That is what grandparenta said to me."

"I wish I could visit her."

"Sorry. Not allowed. She doesn't even remember you. Not really. Only as a toddler. She doesn't even recognize me either. Most of the time." Arilla stood up and walked into the house.

It was a lot to think about. And plan for.

The biggest question that remained was if they brought Jendal, Opal, and Krill here, would they acclimate to life on Galataria?

Chapter 38 - Earth

Jendal - Age 26

Waves washed against the shore. Beautiful waves filled with hope, peace, and longing. Longing for what, Jendal was unsure. Sunset washed multi colors across the waves, sky, and fluffy clouds, showing pinks and purples as it dipped into the sea for a refreshing salty bath.

He waited on the bench by the boat dock, in hopes that an answer appeared as the waves washed over the beach. Waves of sleepiness slipped across his brain. Days had gone by since he had slept. Always waiting, hoping for an answer. A month. Or more. And no response from his attempts to reach Leonard.

The island had changed. Not physically perhaps. Definitely in the number of people there. From five people it had ballooned to sixteen. The only person not there was Tamela. Her calming presence would be valued, if she could leave her training behind. Soon, she planned to join them. If they were still there.

His mind drifted off into memories of Tamela when she was young. When they all were younger and didn't know as much about fear, anger, or hurt. Maybe Opal did. She had always been private. He had never pried to find out when the bad things started happening to her. He knew that once she arrived at the island, they had stopped. And since she had not been a legal adult, she had had to maintain contact with her parents. In the last month had they found out that her parents had continued receiving support payments for her due to her disability after she moved to the island. Something hadn't been turned off that should have been. Opal hadn't seen a penny of that money.

Dr. Newell and his mother were working on that. It would take time to deal with the multiple governments involved. Time they might have, or need, if they couldn't make it to Leonard's world. Wherever it was.

Jendal's memory drifted into dreams. Waves lapped at the shore and the boats tapped the dock they were tied to. Soft waves rocked more than lapped. His body seemed to rock with the waves.

Creaks louder, and different pitches, than the boats tapping the dock woke him. Gently. Softly.

Jendal rolled over and realized he wasn't in his own head. Or his body. His mind had slipped into Leonard's mind. He recognized the hands, even in the gloomy low illumination. Where were they?

His thoughts drifted through Leonard's. Something he knew Leonard had done with him. Rather disconcerting. It was how they managed to communicate. As his mind reached the current event thoughts, he found a few blocks. Mini blocks. Beyond them, was the name Maryiana. And Narona and Ria. Names Jendal had heard Leonard speak when signing years ago. At a rock wall, on a bridge, and other places too. Names that meant happiness to Leonard.

He reached onward to find out more about Maryiana. Those thoughts were mixed up with Genetica. Names Jendal didn't recognize flashed across the barrier between the minds. His own name appeared. Soon. To reach Jendal. Those seemed to be his focus words at the moment. Almost more than Ria, Narona, Gilbertan, Maryiana, or Genetica.

As his mind began the slip back to the present, he felt more than heard the words. "I'll find Jendal soon. And bring him. Home. I know how." The last words were mumbled as Leonard rolled over in his sleep and Jendal's mind slipped back to the tiny island paradise that had become a cage. A cage of fear of people better forgotten. Gone from their lives forever.

Jendal awoke to a cat rubbing up against him. He reached down to pet it. One of Trickle's granddaughters. A sweet cat who liked him more than anyone else on the island. He smiled at the cat as she positioned herself in his lap.

It was time to figure out how to help Leonard find them. Did they need to be somewhere else? He drifted back through all his memories of the dreams of Leonard. Maryiana. Nally. Orlena. It clicked.

Leonard was back in the country he and Opal had left. Their safety might be in finding where. Where Opal's parents would never think to look for them.

He petted the cat. Then he carefully picked up and held her close. She couldn't make the trip with them. After he stood up, he sat her back on the bench. She settled back down to nap.

Instead of going back to the observatory for his work shift, he went to Hanger Home. Dr. Newell and his mom would still be awake.

After he locked the door behind him, Jendal walked into the common area. Dr. Newell and his mother were playing chess in one of the seating areas. He sat on a nearby couch.

His mother held out her hand.

Jendal touched his fingertips to hers.

"I heard more of Leonard's words." Jendal wanted to drift back to signs instead of words. However, there were too many names. "Orlena, Nally, Maryiana. We need to find them."

Dr. Newell nodded. "Sounds right. Orlena is probably New Orleans. Not sure about Nally."

Jendal lifted his hand to sign. "Sounds right. Across the river from each other."

"Maryiana." Dr. Newell rubbed his chin. "Unsure. Would we need to go there?"

Jendal glanced at his mother. He signed instead of speaking. "We do. I don't know why. Or how. Right into the one place they wouldn't expect us to be."

Dr. Newell nodded. "Might be safest there. The Denmark prison is concerned Opal's parents may be getting word out."

"I'll work tonight. I have to learn more. Then, we can go?"

"I'll work on it." Dr. Newell shifted on the couch. "Going to take some supply shifting."

"And lots of paperwork we don't have." Jendal groaned. It might take years for the paperwork to be fixed, and could he go back after what had happened as a teen? When he had saved Opal, even if he couldn't save Ms. Evelyn.

"We will take care of it." His mother leaned toward him before she signed the next few words. "You will take your family home, if all goes well."

"Mom."

She shook her head. "I can't go. I'm staying. You will be fine." She placed her hand on Dr. Newell's arm.

What she didn't say burned deep into his heart. The surgery hadn't been successful. The cancer was worse than anyone suspected. Her body had hidden the cancer from her mind, as she assumed the pain and discomfort were part of aging. She hadn't

even gone to the doctor until too late. They had reminded her she was in a country with good health care. She shouldn't have waited. Within days, the surgery had occurred. They couldn't take it all.

"Will you travel with us if we find Maryiana?"

"I can't."

"Krill." She was two and a half. She only knew one grandmother. Unless he counted Uncle Henry and Aunt Zalena.

"Krill will forget me, I know. You will have to keep my memory alive. Perhaps, in Leonard's world, you will find a new grandmother for her, ready and waiting."

"I never knew my grandparents. It was something I wanted her to have. A sense of normalcy for her."

"I know." His mother touched his fingertips again. "Go find out what you can. We'll plan."

Jendal's mind sifted through the patterns of his jumbled thoughts as they raced faster than he could remember. He left Hanger Home, careful to lock the door behind him. Once they reached Maryiana, they wouldn't be safe until they found Leonard's world. It could be anywhere.

Wenda and Vivian were busy working when he entered the observatory. They glanced at him.

He walked over to his computer and turned it on. "If we leave, will you go back to not using the locks?"

They looked at each other and back at him. Wenda signed their reply. "We will keep using them. Perhaps less, if we are nearby. They give us a sense of safety too."

"I have to research those metal mirrors tonight." He sat down and pulled the screens up.

"I'll message Quilly you won't be on the counting project tonight." Wenda turned to her computer.

He observed the slideshow of the mirror slowly rotating. How he knew it was a mirror, he wasn't sure. The rotation mesmerized him.

Snatches of memories from Leonard's world drifted back across the ether. The museum as a preschooler. His mind had transported to Leonard's world and seen the flat entrance. No steps. A wheelchair, which he didn't know what it was then, and it was different than any he had seen here. In fact, he had never noticed steps anywhere in Leonard's world. All buildings had equal access. Access for everyone. No one was forgotten, or left behind. Anger

had seemed unknown, before a few years ago. And that wasn't even anger. More similar to fear. Not an emotion that Jendal knew the precise name of.

It was a place he had always longed for. And now, more than ever. A home. Even safer than the island in the ocean, that had become rather crowded with fifteen people on it.

Somehow, the mirrors mattered.

He followed the trajectory of the one that focused several times a day on a particular place on the US east coast. He pulled out the online map program. There wasn't even a town there. A creek joined the Susquehanna River to the southeast of the spot. No named town. No named roads on the map. So close to the original location of Emerging Lineages. Where the scientist who should have been his father had worked on remote projects.

Jendal, Opal, and Krill would sneak into the woods and hide until they reached Leonard.

Of course, if Opal's parents, or someone working for her parents found them, they couldn't call for help either.

It was a chance they'd have to take.

He saved the location information and texted Dr. Newell. It wouldn't be long before they'd have to go. For their own safety. He shut the computer down and reached the door before he remembered to say goodbye to Wenda and Vivian. Depending on when they left, he might never see them again. A slight pang disturbed him. He was used to them. And his work here. He didn't have training for anything he knew about in Leonard's world.

Chapter 39 - Galataria

Leonard - Age 26

The bridge looked no different than three sun cycles ago when he left. Leonard crossed the bridge slowly. As if he expected something, or someone, to stop him every step.

He paused in the middle of the bridge, where the chestnut sapling had first grown. The tiny repair, no larger than a thumbnail was visible to him, though no one else knew it was there. Leonard touched it. As if it could reach to Jendal, like the waking dream of a few light cycles before. While he was on the solar ship.

Could he reach Jendal, as he had felt that Jendal was reaching for him? Searching his mind and memory. While intrusive, he knew Jendal was searching for hope. A way home. To the home he didn't know, had never seen, smelled, or remembered. However, his genetics would remember. They would know the bright sunshine here. The dappled shade. The peace and safety that Leonard knew was here, between Maryiana and Genetica.

He glanced up. Blaise waited for him at the stone circle where the chestnut tree grew. Limbs drooped over Blaise's head. They swayed gently in the breeze. Leafed out and growing strong. Roots deep in the ground, some reached for the forest nearer Genetica, and others reached for the river, bringing life giving water to itself, and all living beings around it, and among its leaves.

Leonard waved to Blaise. It was good to visit with his legator again. He trotted across the second half of the bridge. When he stepped off the edge of the bridge, he saw Blaise's face more clearly. Lines etched across his forehead. A trick of the light? Or had they been there before, and Leonard hadn't noticed?

He held his hand up in greeting, ready to sign to Blaise.

Blaise held his hand up with the stop sign. "Sorry, I cannot see well enough right now. Soon."

Leonard sat across from his legator. "What?"

"Eye clouds. Will be removed in a few light cycles. The doctor said they have been growing for a few sun cycles."

Leonard nodded. Of course, his legator was even older than his parenta. He would develop some of the age issues which genetic adaptations had not been able to remove.

His legator used a specific hand signal before speaking. One that meant signs could not be used. Spoken words were less permanent. "Sun is too bright. The air is so clear. The doctor says she sees more cases in the men from Genetica, as we don't stay in our forest as much. She thinks it won't happen to the younger ones who spend more time in Maryiana, or other open areas."

He felt the strangeness of not being able to communicate in his preferred format. Only in the last few sun cycles had that happened. Heat pushed through Leonard. A heat he now knew was fear. They were being watched. Possibly all men were since Vincent had made his feelings known. All would be punished, if anything went wrong. He knew Jendal had to return home. With Opal and Krill.

He touched a tip of a branch to try to communicate with Blaise that he was thinking of Jendal. That he was here to reach him. To bring him home.

"Tonight, visit my home for dinner. Bring Gilbertan and Perrin." Blaise stood up and turned toward Genetica. He paused. "Glad you are home."

Leonard waited until Blaise was out of sight.

Leonard closed the door to his former home. His hand drifted slowly over the door handle. The door handle was so different from any he had seen Jendal use. It wasn't round. It was a simple lever that pushed down, with, or without a load. There were other door opening methods too, for those who needed them.

Gilbertan and Perrin had gone before with their meal contribution. They had carried the venison stew and roasted vegetables in a solar basket. The design had been primarily Perrin's. A transportable solar cooking basket.

As he walked past the home that Ria and Narona shared, he paused. Their older daughters were outside stacking sticks and stones. Much as he had when a toddler. As had Gilbertan.

Ria opened the door. "May I join you?"

He nodded. The walk would be like old times. Their signs flew faster than talkies could read them. His closeness to her seemed unusual. At least on Galataria.

She pulled a light cover over her shoulders and joined him on the walkway.

Leonard startled. Ria. The feelings he felt for her. The closeness was more similar to the way Jendal felt about Opal. Something he had never thought about. He didn't feel that close to Narona. Narona's friendship was similar to his friendship with Gilbertan.

As they reached the bridge, far beyond the sight of the village, Ria raised her hand to sign. "Have something to share. Narona knows. She can't tell you. I shouldn't."

He paused and looked at her. "The Matrilineal Council knows."

"Knows what?"

"About what happened here. They feel fear. However, there is a locked law they may have to unlock early."

He leaned against the bridge support. "Which locked law?"

"Narona can't be caught telling you. It's mixed up in a tale. You may bring Jendal and his family home. However, we aren't supposed to live in family groups for another five sun cycles. They will allow him. With a few close chosen friends. Near here. Not part of a current community."

"They want to study us. And Jendal." Leonard looked back.

"I think so." Ria looked at his right shoulder. "We will make it work. Prove we are ready for the dreamed of future."

"How do they know that much?"

She peered over the bridge. "I didn't tell. Nor did Narona. Maybe one of them is connected?"

"Does it mean I have to give up my legator duties?"

Ria shook her head. "No. However, we have to reach Jendal. Find out if he is able to bring more. Dinah contact said they need coordinates. Not sure what that means. Do you?"

"More? Jendal has access?"

"I believe so. So does Narona. Send him the thoughts tonight."

"I will. Jendal does know what coordinates mean. He uses that word often in his thoughts."

Ria turned away from him and walked on to Genetica.

He followed. More to think about. How would they transplant them? Where was Jendal?

The celebration was a nice way to begin a new future for him in Maryiana. Leonard couldn't stay in Maryiana for long. With Gilbertan and Perrin, there simply wasn't enough room in the one room home. He was used to being alone with his thoughts and dreams.

The meal had been eaten outdoors, under the trees.

Ria had stayed and enjoyed the meal. Her hand brushed his as they cleaned up.

Blaise smiled. "The villages are filling up. Leonard, where will you stay?"

Leonard glanced at Ria and then to Perrin and Gilbertan. "I believe we should explore south of here and build a few new homes. Perhaps twice the distance between Maryiana and Genetica. Gilbertan, what do you think?"

Gilbertan smiled. "I know the perfect place. A small clearing where I fish would do. Back of it, in the woods is another clearing large enough for four homes. Maybe a fifth eventually."

Ria signed. "That will do nicely. An easy walk or boat ride to Maryiana for anything we don't have there."

"Is the clearing large enough to grow food?" Leonard leaned back against his legator's home.

Gilbertan held up his hands and took his time before replying. "Once we obtain permission to gather enough trees to build four homes, yes. We will simply enlarge the clearing. We won't need a large growing area."

"Large enough for squash and beans. Plenty of berries and other edibles in the forest." Ria glanced at a few men walking by. "I better return to Maryiana."

"We should all go home. Thanks Blaise." Leonard stood up to help carry the now empty solar cooking basket.

As they crossed the bridge, Ria paused and signed for them all to step close enough to read her signs in the dusky moonlight. "How long will it take to scout and build homes?"

Gilbertan closed his eyes and thought before responding. "Two or three moon cycles to prepare and build. With help."

"I'll contact the Dinah representative during first light. We have to rescue Jendal. We don't have moon cycles. We have light cycles. At most."

Perrin lifted his hand to sign. "It'll be storm season soon. We can use sails from solar ships to build shelters there until we finish if we have to."

She nodded. "Good. They must be safe, and away from the villages until the Matrilineal Council says otherwise." Ria turned back toward Maryiana and led them into the village.

Leonard tugged gently to remind Perrin and Gilbertan they had to hurry home. Soon, he would be a living bridge between Jendal and Galataria. Similar to the stone bridges he had built. He would have to be strong in the storms of emotions they would bring with them, and stable enough to help them join the society of Galataria when they were ready. If not them, their daughter Krill could join Maryiana, when she reached apprentice age.

The clearing for the new homes had been analyzed. Trees on the edges chosen to be turned into walls. A total of eight trees were harvested for the four homes. There was plenty of room for homes and a small garden. Four sets of solar ship sails had been prepared as temporary homes. Rain and wind covers. Little more. Camping in the wild. Words from Jendal's world.

It had been three light cycles since the discussion on the bridge. The Dinah representative had told them to be on the bridge half way between late light and early light.

Leonard and Ria sat a few body lengths away from where the chestnut tree had begun life. They didn't know what would happen. Even the Dinah representative didn't know. They had never transported anything larger than a mouse.

Perrin and Gilbertan had a small boat in the water under the bridge, in case they appeared in the water.

The air began to shimmer.

A tiny form appeared on the bridge next to the support.

The shimmering coalesced into a small cat.

Leonard guessed it was Trickle.

Ria sent a smile picture to the representative in Dinah on her charged tablet.

Leonard grabbed the cat.

The next shimmer was larger. It finally cleared up into the image of a sleeping toddler girl. Her right arm drooped onto the bridge holding a tattered stuffed owl.

Ria signed. "She was likely probably holding the cat in her sleep. I'll move her." She gently picked up the girl and pulled her out of where the shimmers landed before she sent the update to Dinah.

The next shimmer was of a larger form. A woman appeared on the stones.

Ria gasped.

There were scratches on the woman's arms and face, barely visible in the moonlight. And a fist sized scab on her knee. She leaned forward. "Krill."

Leonard stepped forward to help pull her toward them.

She gasped at him and shrank backwards.

"I'm Leonard." He held his hand out.

She placed her hand in his. "Jendal?"

"We have to move you first." Leonard gave her hand a light tug.

She nodded and followed him over to Ria and Krill.

The cat had circled around the tiny girl and curled up beside her to keep her warm.

The next shimmer was a little larger. One Leonard recognized. It coalesced into Jendal's form.

Ria sent the last comment to Dinah. "Better take them to the boat."

Jendal tried to stand. He slumped back down.

"What's wrong?" Leonard crawled over to him.

"Head hurts." Jendal touched his head and pulled his hand away.

"They've never done this before." Ria signed. "Are you okay?"

"Think so. Rest a moment."

Leonard glanced at Ria. A word they didn't recognize.

"I'll carry Krill down." Ria gently lifted the small girl.

Opal touched the toddler. "Wait."

"Leonard and I will help you and Jendal down. We have to go."

Soon, they were all in the boat with Perrin and Gilbertan paddling downstream. Five adults, one toddler, and a cat. To build a village of their own on a piece of land nearby. With the Matrilineal Council's potential guarded blessing.

Chapter 40 - Galataria

Jendal - Age 26

Jendal massaged his right wrist. It was sore from where he landed on it when he fell on the stone work bridge. He rolled over, which pulled the covers off of Opal. Jendal covered her back up. It wasn't daylight. Wouldn't be for a while. He crawled out of the makeshift tent to look around.

Outside, the sky was bright with starlight and moonlight. It washed across the clearing. Night vision allowed him to see reasonably. He walked up to the campfire. It was sleepy ashes. Jendal sat on one of the logs around it. A sense of freedom. Peace. Feelings he hadn't truly felt since Opal's birthday in the garden with Tamela, Uncle Henry and Aunt Zalena.

He knew he would never see Tamela, Uncle Henry, or Aunt Zalena again. It had been a tearful goodbye. However, it was their only hope for a future. Safety.

One of the tents flapped. Leonard walked out and joined him. "Okay?"

Leonard's words sounded strange. Not the way it sounded in his head. The accent was strong. An accent he couldn't quite name, and unique to Galataria.

Jendal nodded. "Sore wrist. A bandage will help it."

"I'll find one when the sun wakes up." Leonard looked out toward the river.

"Tell me about it. What did you hint at last night?"

Leonard sighed. "Signs are easier. I'd rather tell you, Opal, and Krill at once."

Jendal laughed. "Krill won't understand, she's five. Opal, she needs reassurance."

Leonard picked up a stick and raked the cold fire. "Genetically, you are my identical twin. Only a few in Dinah know living beings can move between worlds. They don't actually know how."

"So there is a lot to learn?"

Leonard nodded. "The language is different here. We will teach you. The lifestyle is different here. You will have to learn it, and blend in."

"They. The people in Dinah, won't bring bad people here?"

Leonard shook his head. "No. Our one concern is they may use the technology to send a few dangerous people from here to your world."

"I hope not."

Leonard laughed. "They may have come from there. They'd fit right on Earth. Not here."

Jendal nodded. This was a land of peace. And it needed to stay that way. "Does anyone else have the connective dreams?"

"Only my mother. That I know of. We suspect someone else on the Matrilineal Council may. One of the recent additions. Otherwise, we wouldn't have been able to obtain permission to bring you home."

Jendal placed his head in his hands. "So much difference. While, so similar. They haven't been using Earth as a place to send criminals have they?" There were so many mean people there. Penny. Opal's family.

Leonard drew a circle with the small stick. "No. You all are the first live people. The genetic material was an accident. You were an accident. It was supposed to be observation. Soon after, a few others were discovered as switched from the genetic center, they realized they could bring insects and small mammals back. Bring back the lost species."

"So bringing me home."

"Is a secret. A man's dying secret. Only a few people will even know it happened. And none living will know how to repeat it."

Jendal turned to this twin brother he didn't really know. "He killed himself?"

Leonard placed his hand on his knee. "He is dying of cancer. He damaged the technology codes. No one will be able to replicate large transfers. He believed that he corrected the accident, and doesn't want another mistake to occur. The knowledge will remain a time locked secret."

"How do they choose when knowledge is learned?"

Leonard twirled the small stick. "The forgotten knowledge is kept in a locked vault. It cannot be opened before the date they set. There are clues that if someone else develops it, they will be told it is forbidden until that time."

"And people listen to the rules?" Jendal was surprised. On Earth, they'd view those rules as something to break. A constraint they shouldn't have to acknowledge.

"No one wants the memory of the Devolution War to return." Leonard tossed the small stick into the fire. "We need you. We need those genes. We almost died during the war. And again a few generations later."

"I gave the coordinates you asked for. Dr. Newell gave them to me."

Leonard stood up. "Four sets. Our transmitters got them all. They will be spread out across Galataria to save us. Once they have been approved as missing a certain gene pair." He began to walk to the river.

"Do we have to stay here?" Jendal followed.

"For now. Until you learn some of the differences. Narona has Sub Council authority. She will transmit your cases to them."

"It's not that we want to be around lots of people."

Leonard stepped into the boat. "I know. Come on and row with me. Don't speak. We will pick up Ria and Narona. If anyone else is there, use signs, no words."

Jendal nodded. He would do that.

They rowed in silence. A peaceful silence back to the bridge where they had landed the night before. Stars shone brightly on the water. Brighter than Jendal had ever seen. With the moon adding more light, he could almost see the scars on his rowing hands. From Earth. Scars from Madella and Penny. The world he had left behind. The scars would always remind him of the past. Of emotions that needed to be tamed. Of the mask that had slipped almost off when he reached the bridge. Maybe it would disappear here.

Animals called to each other along the shore, and across the river to each other. When they reached the bridge, they pulled up to a walkway and rested the boat on the ground. It could slide off the bank if a storm occurred.

Jendal barely had time to look around before a man walked down from the bridge. The older man crossed his arms against the early light chill and spoke softly with Leonard.

Leonard responded as indistinctly.

Two women walked down the dirt walkway. They smiled at him and joined him in the boat.

Leonard returned.

They paddled back downstream.

Once they were out of earshot, Jendal turned to Leonard. "Who?"

Leonard chuckled. "Our legator. He wanted to see you."

Jendal searched his mind for the word legator. He had heard Leonard use it in the dreams. He wasn't sure of he meaning.

One of the women laughed at his expression. Then she lifted her hand to sign. "I can tell you are confused. You are the legator for Krill."

He smiled. It was like learning a new language. Something he could do. The mask was slipping off here. The one he had worn so long on Earth. Even if it never slipped off fully, his daughter would never have to wear a mask on Galataria.

Before long they were back at the camp. Opal was awake at the empty fire. Krill and Trickle chased each other around the log seats.

Time passed. To Jendal and Opal, it was two months. To the rest of the village in the making, it was two moon cycles. Not much different. They could use the same signs for both. Only the spoken words were different. Homes were almost finished. Ria and Narona's children would be joining them in a few days, or rather light cycles. Jendal knew he had to use the Galataria words instead of the Earth ones now. However, sometimes, he slipped. Even Opal did.

Opal had begun the garden with some help from Perrin. His brother's friend had also taken her to learn the edible plants in the forest.

Jendal had followed along, and made friends with many of the animals he had never known. As each sun rose, he could feel the sun rising higher on his treasured dreams. To live. To live in peace and safety in nature. With the family he was building.

Even Blaise had visited, and stayed for several light cycles. He was no longer able to help with physical labor. He was however, able to be a trainer in the vocabulary and life style differences between the two cultures.

Jendal waved to Krill to follow him to the river's edge.

She smiled and ran ahead of him to the bench he had built there. Similar to the bench on their former peaceful private island.

Soon, the boat was in sight. Perrin and Narona paddled it downstream with the four young children sitting as patiently as young children could.

Leonard walked up beside him. "Have you chosen an apprenticeship?"

"Nothing here is anything like I am used to doing, or know. Can Blaise teach me to be a trainer for the children? Opal says there will be another soon."

Leonard nodded. "We want to learn from you also. Some of your life may help us here. A few villages are turning into towns. Living together. It's an experiment the Matrilineal Council approve of. A few sun cycles before they had planned for people to try."

"You've always lived apart?"

"In most villages, since the war. They set the time to reopen living together for when they hoped our genetics would have forgotten the fear men caused, to each other, and to women. Leonard lifted his hand to wave to the approaching boat.

"Is it actually time?"

"Yes. It was supposed to be us."

"I'm not sure about me." Jendal stepped back as Perrin threw the line to Leonard. The mask had slipped back on as they talked out loud. He hoped the mask soon slipped away into the lapping river water, to be washed out to the sea.

"I'm sure." Leonard tied the boat firmly and held out his hand for Ria to step onto the ground. "I'm certain."

Jendal held out his hand to Narona. Even with the problems Leonard had mentioned, they'd find a way to live here peacefully. Galataria was the Earth he had dreamed of. Hoped for. The perfect home for himself, Opal, Krill, and whomever would come after.

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Thank you for reading Galataria's Echoes. I hope you enjoyed this exploration of Earth and Galataria. If you enjoyed it, please take a moment to leave me a review at your favorite online retailer and share it on social media. Choose another fiction, or nonfiction, title to explore on your journey through the myths society has encouraged us to live by.

Thanks!

Gail Brown

About the Author

Gail Brown began reading at far too young an age. Her preferred reading material was nonfiction, with biographies and science being at the forefront of her library excursions.

Her ability to memorize and use all the grammar rules in school years led to working in the school library while classmates caught up. All of those rules, and diagramming sentences was easy and relaxing. For many years. All forgotten now. Except the joyful memories of preparing the library for others to use.

Along the way, she found fiction and science fiction to help bring hope and light to a world of colorful dreams. A world where disability was accepted, people lived their lives without overwork and fear.

As an adult, gardening, and preparing the garden bounty, was her way to relax. To think. To make order out chaos.

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Concurrent Earths is collection containing 40 short stories of Earth, or almost Earth, that may, or may not, exist.

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